

THE Nation

150

Written Off

Veteran newspaper
journalists are a
dying breed. That's
bad for journalism—
and democracy.

Dale Maharidge

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Letters

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Beware the Clintons

Michelle Alexander powerfully explains why black people should be wary of Bill and Hillary Clinton ["Black Lives Shattered," Feb. 29]. Here are a few more reasons:

- Both Clintons still support the death penalty, which disproportionately affects people of color.
- Hundreds, if not thousands, of Haitians fled their homeland during the Clinton administration. They were either sent back to Haiti or inhumanely detained at Guantánamo. (Cuban refugees during the same period entered the United States easily.)
- United Nations troops already in Rwanda might have prevented or lessened the horrendous genocide by shutting down hate-radio stations and confiscating major caches of machetes. The Clinton administration stymied such an intervention; 800,000 black people died.
- When opposition arose to the nomination of distinguished lawyer Lani Guinier to an important Justice Department post, President Clinton failed to support her.
- A reporter asked Surgeon General Joycelyn Elders whether masturbation should be discussed in sex-education classes. She said yes. Bill Clinton fired her.

SANFORD BERMAN
EDINA, MINN.

☞ Thank you so much for this article. I have followed Michelle Alexander's work for years, and I consider *The New Jim Crow* to be essential reading for all Americans. In short, she is one of my true heroes, and I don't believe it is possible to overstate her contribution to our national discussion on race. Again, thank you.

That said, I have two minor beefs with her article, and they are as follows: 1) She gives short shrift to Bernie Sanders's career-long battle for social

justice, including (but not limited to) fighting for desegregation and marching with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.; and 2) She makes no reference to the shameless race-baiting campaign the Clintons ran against then-Senator Barack Obama in 2008, including disseminating their little photo of Obama in Kenya (wearing the traditional garb of a Somali elder) and refusing to state categorically that Obama is a Christian (as then-Senator Clinton did on *60 Minutes*). The Clintons in 2008 apparently concluded that ghettoizing drug references and feeding into a little Islamophobic "birtherism" might help them win, which was shameless and morally reprehensible. I feel strongly that Alexander should have included both of these significant points.

JAMES O'DONNELL III

Michelle Alexander's article failed to speculate on how much worse all the statistics she cites would have been had an unabashed right-wing Republican been in the White House pushing a more extreme version of the same policies. Perhaps in an unavoidably right-wing time, Clinton did what he could to mitigate what he could not prevent. The ultimate blame lies with the right wing.

STEPHEN VAN ECK
LAWTON, PENN.

☞ Standing ovation!

RACHEL WEAVER

Occupying the Democrats

Heather McGhee and Ian Haney-Lopez are right on that progressives should make a strong link between racism and white working-class disempowerment ["How Progressives Should Talk About Race," Feb. 29]. I hope many Bernie lovers will send him copies of their article.

Michelle Alexander is also right

☞ Comments drawn from our website

letters@thenation.com

(continued on page 26)

Beyond Super Tuesday

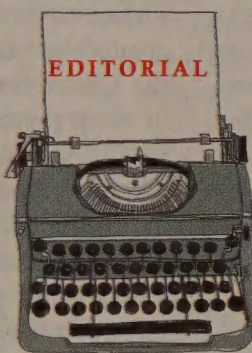
Super Tuesday was always going to be tough for Bernie Sanders. Devised and promoted by the Democratic Leadership Council as a counter to the party's progressive tendencies, the "SEC Primary" took the nomination battle through a raft of large Southern states where Hillary Clinton was

heavily favored. As expected, she had a very good night, stacking up big wins in Texas, Virginia, Georgia, Tennessee, Alabama, and Arkansas, and squeaking out a victory in Massachusetts.

But Clinton was not just going for a very good night: She was going for a sweep that would marginalize Bernie Sanders's insurgent candidacy and drive him out of the race. The Clinton campaign made an aggressive final push to win those states where Sanders was competitive, even trying to close the gap in his home state of Vermont. That didn't happen: Despite the fact that prominent Democrats like Governor Peter Shumlin and former governor Madeleine Kunin were actively campaigning for Clinton, Sanders won 86 percent of the vote to just 14 percent for Clinton in his biggest win of the night. Sanders also showed strength outside of New England, winning Oklahoma by a 10-point margin, the swing state of Colorado by 19 points, and Minnesota by 24. In Massachusetts, where Clinton had the support of Boston Mayor Marty Walsh and State Attorney General Maura Healey, as well as the endorsement of *The Boston Globe*, Sanders held the front-runner to just 50.1 percent and gained almost as many pledged delegates. With 15 states now having voted, Clinton leads Sanders by less than 200 pledged delegates, and both are far from the 2,383 needed to secure the nomination.

Now that terrain changes considerably. One reason that Super Tuesday has functioned as a make-or-break event was its impact on a candidate's ability to raise enough money to continue the fight in major media markets, where airtime is expensive and the kind of face-to-face campaigning needed to win in Iowa or New Hampshire just isn't possible. With over 1.5 million donors—only 2 percent of whom have maxed out—Sanders shouldn't have a problem, as his campaign demonstrated by rais-

ing over \$42 million in February alone. Although he failed to persuade black voters across the rural South, that region may be a poor bellwether for urban voters in Michigan, Wisconsin, New York, Ohio, and Pennsylvania. These are all states the Democrats need to win in the fall—and places where Sanders's economic message is all but certain to resonate with workers, white and black alike, who have been left behind by Wall Street's recovery.



By holding his own on Super Tuesday, Sanders goes into these and other contests with a viable—if steep—path to the nomination, and he has vowed to carry on. "Let me assure you that we are going to take our fight for economic justice, for social justice, for environmental sanity, for a world of peace, to every one of those states," he pledged on Tuesday. That's bad news for anyone who wanted a speedy coronation, but it's actually good news for the party—and the country. In addition to providing a running contrast with Republican front-runner Donald Trump's assault on basic decency, a prolonged Democratic contest means that both candidates will keep competing to register voters, identify donors, and organize supporters. Whoever wins the nomination should be grateful for that—and for not having to face the Republican nominee untested.

Clinton is again the favorite, backed by the party establishment, big donors, and much of the media. To win, Sanders will need a message that allows him to upset those odds. He must broaden his appeal among African-American and Latino voters, who will be a factor in many of the states he must win in the weeks to come. He'll also need to find the tactical levers that will get his core of young progressive supporters to vote in record numbers. That's what it means to wage an insurgent candidacy, a "political revolution."

As we argued a year ago, when a presumptive

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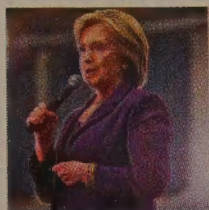
Vivian Gornick

35 Films: Whiskey Tango

Foxtrot • Hail, Caesar! •
Songs My Brothers
Taught Me • Creative
Control
Stuart Klawans

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The digital version of this issue is
available to all subscribers March 3
at TheNation.com.



25%

Democratic voters on Super Tuesday who were black

80%

Approximate portion of the black vote won by Hillary Clinton on Super Tuesday

37%

Black voters under age 30 who voted for Bernie Sanders

49%

Black voters who trust only Clinton on race relations, according to exit polls

"Thirty-five states remain. And let me assure you that we are going to take our fight...to every one of those states."

Bernie Sanders, on Super Tuesday

front-runner "faces serious competition, one of two things happens": The candidate is either "defeated, or... sharpens his or her message sufficiently to move beyond 'safe' politics." A year ago, Hillary Clinton was still on the fence regarding the Keystone XL pipeline and thought the Trans-Pacific Partnership "sets the gold standard in trade agreements." She didn't call for criminal-justice reform until last year. Although critics might question her sincerity on these shifts, none of them would have happened without the prod of competition.

So let's see what happens in Illinois, where Clinton will have to choose between loyalty to Rahm Emanuel and allying with Black Lives Matter. Let the voters in New Mexico and New Jersey, Oregon and California have their say. Because whether the Republicans opt for Trump or Ted Cruz or Marco Rubio, the one certainty is that the Democratic nominee will get no respite. If only to ensure that the eventual nominee is prepared for that onslaught, we hope the Democrats' clash of ideas and issues continues for some time. ■

Blundering Into War?

Today's global tensions echo the "guns of August."

Whether or not we have slid into a "new Cold War," as claimed by Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev at the Munich Security Conference on February 13, we certainly have entered a period of escalating provocations, with China, Russia, the United States, and other major powers testing one another's resolve through a series of military feints. While usually contained below the level of armed combat, these actions—deployment of bombers or warships in or near a rival's territory, construction of new military bases in menacing locations, aggressive military maneuvers, and so on—naturally invite countermeasures of an increasingly belligerent sort and so increase the risk of war.

COMMENT These provocations are occurring on multiple fronts simultaneously. In Asia, the United States, China, Japan, and other powers are engaged in an escalating contest of wills over control of disputed islands in both the East and South China seas. In Europe, Russia is seeking to extend its sway over eastern Ukraine, while the United States and its NATO allies are bolstering their forces on Russia's periphery. In the Middle East, numerous countries, including the United States, Russia, Turkey, Iran, and Saudi Arabia, are jockeying for geopolitical advantage amid the bloody ruins of Syria. (The "cessation of hostilities" agreement recently negotiated by Secretary of State John Kerry and his Russian counterpart, Sergey Lavrov, may dampen this competition, but the other parties involved show no inclination to temper their own involvement.)

Each of these countries has its own reasons for conducting such activities. China, a rising power, seeks to reclaim its historic status as the regional hegemon—which involves testing America's determination to retain its status as the current hegemon. Russia, a former superpower,

seeks to reverse the encroachment of Western powers on its periphery and restore its sway over areas once incorporated into the Soviet Union—a drive that inevitably entails clashes with NATO and its new members in Eastern Europe. The United States, still the world's sole superpower but weakened by the bruising wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, seeks to repel any further challenges to its global paramountcy. Washington's dilemma is further complicated by the 2016 presidential election, with all the Republican candidates and Democrat Hillary Clinton calling on President Obama to act more assertively in addressing these challenges. While none of these actors, at home or abroad, wish to provoke an actual shooting war, all seek to demonstrate "resolve" and "toughness" (words we're hearing a lot in the campaign) by engaging in military actions short of war.

This jousting for political and psychological advantage takes various forms. In the East China Sea, China has declared an "air defense identification zone" (ADIZ) over a group of uninhabited islands (called the Diaoyu by China and the Senkaku by Japan) and threatened military action against planes that enter the area without identifying themselves to Chinese air-control authorities. In response, the United States has sent nuclear-capable B-52 bombers into the ADIZ *without* informing Chinese authorities. Chinese and Japanese warships also engage in near-daily show-of-force encounters—coming close to each other and readying (though not, as yet, firing) their guns—in the waters surrounding the islands.

In the South China Sea, the Chinese have built military installations (including airstrips, radar facilities, and surface-to-air missile batteries) on artificial islands they created by piling sand on low-lying atolls; in response, the United States has deployed missile-armed destroyers in close proximity to the Chinese-occupied islands. As part of its "pivot to the Pacific," moreover, the Obama administration has established a new Marine Corps base in northern Australia and beefed up its military ties with the Philippines, going so far as to negotiate the US Navy's return to the giant base at Subic Bay, from which it was ejected in 1992 due to widespread public opposition there.

In Europe, NATO and Russian combat planes have been playing a cat-and-mouse game in international airspace ever since the onset of the Ukrainian crisis. Typically, Russian bombers and fighter planes fly westward toward the airspace of one of the NATO powers, prompting them to scramble interceptor aircraft and chase the Russians planes off—so far without shots being fired. (Turkey, also a NATO member, did shoot down a Russian plane when it allegedly strayed into Turkish airspace on November 24.) Similar moves are reportedly occurring at sea. In October 2014, an unidentified submarine, believed to be Russian, entered Sweden's territorial waters, prompting the largest mobilization by the Swedish Navy since the end of the Cold War.

Both Russia and NATO are also enhancing their capacity to conduct military operations in Ukraine and the surrounding areas—moves designed to send a signal as much as to prepare for actual combat. Russia, for example, has steadily bolstered its military capabilities in areas facing Ukraine. In a March 2015 exercise, the Russians

deployed nuclear-capable Tu-95 and Tu-22M3 strategic bombers in Crimea and Iskander ballistic missiles to Kaliningrad, which borders Poland and Lithuania. NATO, for its part, has been strengthening the military capabilities of Ukraine and the Baltic states—all once part of the USSR—and has been holding elaborate military exercises near Russian territory. Last June, for example, NATO forces conducted the “BALTOPS 2015” naval exercise in the Baltic Sea region, featuring amphibious operations and the use of B-52 bombers to drop antiship mines. According to Dutch Foreign Minister Bert Koenders, the exercise was intended both to reassure NATO members in Eastern Europe and to send “a warning to President Putin.”

This conspicuous parading of military capabilities has escalated to new levels in recent weeks, with decisions by NATO and the United States to further expand their combat capabilities in Eastern Europe. On February 2, Defense Secretary Ashton Carter announced that the Obama administration would quadruple spending on such efforts in the coming fiscal year, raising allocations for its so-called European Reassurance Initiative from \$789 million in 2016 to \$3.4 billion in 2017. This increase, he said, “will fund a lot of things: more rotational US forces in Europe, more training and exercising with our allies, more pre-position and war-fighting gear and infrastructure improvements to support all this.” A similar initiative was announced by the NATO powers at a meeting of defense ministers in Brussels on February 10. In consonance with the US plan, the NATO initiative will involve the rotation of combat forces into Central and Eastern Europe to conduct military exercises and prepare for possible combat there.

Determined to show that it will not be intimidated by any of these moves, Russia’s defense ministry announced a “snap” military exercise on February 8, including ordering troops in its central and southern military districts—an area that includes a stretch of border facing the separatist regions in eastern Ukraine—to full combat readiness. Some analysts viewed this action as preparation for possible intervention in Ukraine if rebel forces there launch a new offensive in the spring; others see it as a warning to Turkey, should the Turks take further action against Russian forces in Syria (like the aircraft incident on November 24).

Where all of this will lead is anyone’s guess. At this point, all that can be said with any confidence is that the frequency and aggressiveness of these provocations is increasing, with each party believing it necessary to respond to its rival’s actions with countermeasures of even greater vigor and boldness. History suggests that such behavior tends to create an atmosphere of ever-increasing tension and suspicion, where one provocation too many can lead to crisis, panic, miscalculation, and a resort to arms—exactly the scenario that led to the outbreak of World War I just over 100 years ago.

If this outcome is to be avoided, all parties involved should take steps to lower the risk of inadvertent escalation. For example, the Obama administration should rethink its decisions to bolster US combat capabilities on the periphery of Russia, to send B-52s into Chinese-claimed airspace, and to deploy warships in Chinese-claimed waters. But the other parties need to take reciprocal actions as well. Secretary of State Kerry should build on the example set by the Syrian cease-fire and engage in intensive dialogue with his Russian and Chinese counterparts to reduce tensions elsewhere. Disagreements will persist on many issues, but these need not be accompanied by the kind of muscle-flexing whose only outcome can be a more precarious and dangerous world.

MICHAEL T. KLARE

Michael T. Klare, defense correspondent for The Nation, is a professor of peace and world-security studies at Hampshire College. He is the author of 14 books on international energy and security affairs, including, most recently, The Race for What’s Left.

Big Changes at TNR

When *The New Republic* was founded in 1914, *The Nation* was already almost 50 years old—and just emerging from its own near-death experience. Though started by radical abolitionists, *The Nation* had over several decades become the house organ of American conservatism, which left plenty of room for a brash, energetic weekly devoted to the ideals of the Progressive Era—and the imperial ambitions of Theodore Roosevelt.

On another occasion, we might be tempted to talk about the different ways our two publications responded to the conflict between ideals and ambitions. Or even to rehash the story of how, under attack by Red-baiters in 1949, the two magazines nearly merged—and why we’re glad they didn’t. Right now, though, we’d rather welcome the acquisition of *The New Republic* by Win McCormack, a longtime friend of *The Nation* and founding editor of the literary quarterly *Tin House* and the former publisher of *Oregon Magazine*.

As for Hamilton Fish, who served as publisher here from 1978 to 1987, and as president of the Nation Institute from 1995 to 2009—and just last year was executive producer of *Hot Type*, Academy Award winner Barbara Kopple’s documentary marking *The Nation*’s 150th anniversary—we wish him well in his new incarnation as *The New Republic*’s publisher and editorial director.

We also look forward to continuing the healthy rivalry between our two publications.

MISPLACED PRIORITIES

MIC Check

President Obama’s proposed 2017 defense budget offers a glimpse into his administration’s priorities at a time when, as Michael Klare describes at left, the United States is seeking to bolster its military power to preserve its status as global hegemon.

\$582.7B

Overall proposed Defense Department budget for fiscal year 2017

\$71.8B

Research and development into new weapon systems

\$58.8B

Overseas contingency operations

\$19B

Modernization of nuclear-weapon systems

\$10.1B

Sixty-three F-35 joint strike fighters

\$7.5B

Operation Inherent Resolve, to combat ISIS in Syria and Iraq

\$5.2B

Two nuclear submarines

\$3.4B

The European Reassurance Initiative, which will increase the US military presence on the continent



F-35

Asking for a Friend



Inside/Outside

Dear Liza,

I left the States many years ago and ended up having a child abroad, as one does. A few years back, after an ill-fated attempt to live in the US with my kid in the middle of a bitter custody battle, I returned to my adopted EU member state to exercise my visitation rights. Though I'd been a working resident alien here for years, the litigation's aftermath left me without my child and extremely depressed—and thus disinclined to continue to bust ass for the state. Since then, I've been on and off the dole—with help from family at home and friends here.

Now, I'm happy to report, my kid lives with me again. But I see no fantastic job in my near future, or at least not one that would allow me to hang out with, listen to, cook for, and watch films with her. It feels so important to finally be able to do all those things together.

Not that I'm lazy! I'm very active in the local social-justice scene. But I also feel a need to be involved at home. So, Liza, my question to you is: Would it be appropriate for me to divert some of my European welfare benefits to the Bernie Sanders campaign? I can spare a few euros thanks to my social and family network.

—Bernie Broad Abroad

Dear Expat,

How wonderful that your kid lives with you again, and that you are spending real time together.

You're right to think seriously about how you use these benefits; social democracy works best when people can trust each other to make sound use of public funds. I would not, for example, condone diverting your government checks into a criminal enterprise or investments in ExxonMobil.

But welfare should help people not only to survive, but to be full citizens, which includes engaging in the political process. Contributing money to candidates is (unfortunately) critical to genuine participation in the

US electoral system. Jobless people in the United States receive such meager benefits that few enjoy the luxury of a dilemma like yours. If Americans ever do achieve a more generous welfare state, however, allowing recipients enough money to shape the political process, and encouraging them to do so, would be fair and sensible policy. The rich certainly aren't shy about using their vast resources to do the same.

I also love that you'd be sending your European benefits to the only presidential candidate who favors inclusive, European-style public programs. It's a fitting and thoughtful gesture toward a future in which more Americans share your freedoms.

Welfare should help people not only to survive, but to be full citizens.

Dear Liza,

I'm a 45-year-old man performing gender transition. I know being a woman is not just about wearing a dress. How do I go about learning how to be an intelligent, powerful woman under late capitalism, and how to be a feminist when the media just tell me to buy, buy, buy? I'm a shopaholic when it comes to women's clothes. Where do I find out what being a woman is really all about?

—Becoming Myself

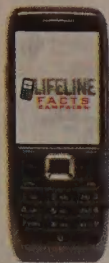
Dear Becoming,

Buying clothes is a delight, and no woman should feel bad about it. Don't let your critical perspective on consumer capitalism deprive you of the joy of looking fabulous.

In fact, such obsessions can be part of a crucial stage in your transition. Miss Vera, founder of Miss Vera's Finishing School for Boys Who Want to Be Girls, which helps cross-dressing men, transwomen, and others, told me that many people undergoing a gender transition experience something like adolescence, "so of course it is all about the clothes, the hair, but it won't stay there."

As Miss Vera points out, as you advance further into your transition, you may face financial problems that make these new





PROTECT AMERICA'S LIFELINE TO OPPORTUNITY, SECURITY AND HEALTH

The Lifeline program has enabled low-income Americans to receive discounted telephone service since 1985 when the Federal Communications Commission established it under Ronald Reagan. George W. Bush expanded Lifeline to include wireless service in 2005, and it has become valuable to Americans in many ways.

The facts are clear – the wireless Lifeline program is working:

- **Lifeline Saves Lives** - In one state alone, Lifeline users make over 780 calls to emergency service providers a day.
- **Lifeline Helps Low-Income Americans Find and Keep Jobs** - One Lifeline provider found that the program improved the financial situation of nearly half its users by helping them find or keep work.
- **Lifeline Serves our Nation's Veterans** - An estimated 13% of wireless Lifeline users are veterans. Even more young, active duty families rely on Lifeline.
- **Lifeline is the New Mobile Health Phone** - 54% of Lifeline subscribers use the service to connect with doctors and for other health-related issues. This is especially significant to low-income older Americans, persons with disabilities, and Americans living in rural areas who often cannot access health care otherwise.
- **Lifeline Can Help Close the Digital Divide** - Nearly 50% of children who live in households with incomes below \$15,000 do not have access to internet at home. By requiring all wireless Lifeline carriers to provide WiFi-enabled Lifeline phones, the FCC could close this divide.

THE FCC IS TAKING ESSENTIAL STEPS TOWARDS IMPROVING LIFELINE.

Proposed reforms include implementing third party eligibility verification and expanding support to include broadband, which will help reduce fraud and modernize the program.

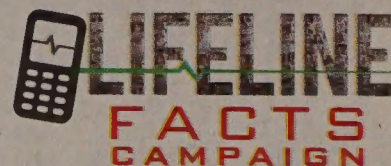
Unfortunately, participation in Lifeline continues to be low. While over 46 million households qualified for Lifeline benefits in 2015, only approximately 12.6 million (27%) enrolled in the program.

Adding barriers to participation will hurt enrollment in the program.

One potential barrier is the addition of a copay requirement for Lifeline customers. Although well-intended, the FCC must be mindful that costly minimum service standards could trigger a copay on Lifeline customers.

FCC pilot programs have shown that even a modest copay would drastically reduce program participation because many recipients cannot pay – either because they cannot afford the charge or they do not have bank accounts from which to pay the fee. A copay would reduce program participation among the nation's poorest.

Join the team at LifelineFacts.com
#LifelineFacts



consumer habits difficult to maintain. Transwomen often confront new expenses, from hormone treatments not covered by insurance to the greater cost of a hairdo. On top of all that, as a woman, you may find that you make less money than you did as a man: Not only are women paid less than men, but you may face extra economic discrimination as a transwoman.

I hope you can buy all the shoes you deserve and more, Becoming, but such constraints do underscore the importance of moving beyond the trappings of femininity and developing your feminist self as well as your look.

Ultimately, the process will be “not just about transformation but integration,” Miss Vera says, emphasizing that you are “taking what you are learning in the female world and integrating it with what you learned in the male world.” The question is not just “What is a woman?” but “What do you already like about the person you are now?” Your project is not to create a new self from scratch, but to find new avenues to express who you already are.

Miss Vera’s Finishing School offers close instruction in this process and boasts many satisfied graduates. Miss Vera does not eschew the shopping, but views clothes, shoes, and makeup as

“props” in your much deeper process of self-discovery.

You also need support. Use your local LGBT center to find support groups for those experiencing gender transition, as well as therapists specializing in trans issues. As well, the magazine *Trans Guys* publishes annual guides to trans conferences, where you can meet people going through similar transitions and attend workshops on these themes. Also, making friends with lots of other women (perhaps you already have!) and listening carefully to them will help you learn more about their lives and the challenges of living a female identity under patriarchy.

You may need role models, too. Who are the women who most inspire you? Make a list. Of each woman on your list, ask yourself why you chose her—odds are, it’s not just how she does her eyes. Though it’s undeniably true that Gloria Steinem looks hot in leather pants, her beauty also has much to do with the pleasure she takes in life and her drive to resist gender oppression. You’ll find your own ways to embrace both the pleasures and the challenges of expressing yourself as a woman.

Congratulations, Becoming. There’s never been a better time to do this. ■

MEET THE WRITER / ÓSCAR MARTÍNEZ

A History of Violence



Óscar Martínez writes for ElFaro.net, the first online newspaper in Latin America. In 2008, he won the Fernando Benítez National Cultural Journalism Award in Mexico, and in 2009, he was awarded the Human Rights Prize at the José Simeón Cañas Central American University in El Salvador.

“Our Bottomless Well,” his article in this issue, is adapted from his new book, *A History of Violence: Living and Dying in Central America*. The book gathers several pieces of his recent investigative reporting, in which he rides along with cops, gangsters, and informants, uncovering the roots of Central America’s pervasive violence. Verso’s English-language translation contains a special

message from Martínez to his readers here. He notes that many of Central America’s notorious gangs started in the United States, with immigrants who’d fled the US-sponsored wars in their own country and formed their own groups in gang-heavy Southern California. When Ronald Reagan began his deportation strategy for managing American violence, hardened criminals were deported and dumped back into Central America,

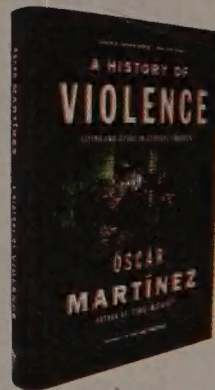
forming the nucleus of today’s Mara Salvatrucha and Barrio 18. This is our problem, too.

Martínez notes that his US readers are oddly practical. He toured the country a few years back to discuss *The Beast: Riding the Rails and Dodging Narcos on the Migrant Trail*, his extraordinary book chronicling his travels through Central America. “In Latin America, the questions I most heard were along the lines of was I

scared to be riding the train, or did anything bad ever happen to me, or which story affected me most. Outside of the region, the most common question was: ‘What’s your solution?’”

Martínez turns that question back on his readers. “I believe,” he

writes, “you should read this book for one simple reason: for the sake of humanity. I want you to understand what thousands of Central Americans are forced to live through. Then you can understand why they keep coming.” But as Martínez points out: “The solution is up to you. The crisis will be solved when people understand, and worsens when they don’t. It’s that simple. And it’s that complicated.”



Join DAVE

ZIRIN on the *Nation* post-election cruise.

Book before
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to receive
\$100 OFF
your cabin!

Costa Maya, Mexico (port of call)



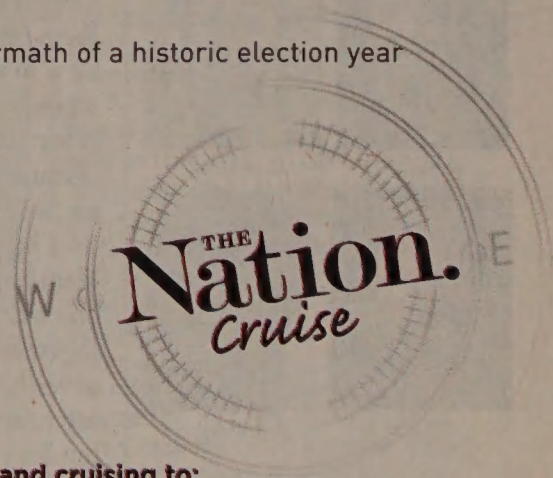
Join us on *The Nation's* post-election cruise, sailing December 9 – 16, 2016.

Book now to receive up to \$100 off in discounts. Secure your spot alongside *Nation* editor and publisher **Katrina vanden Heuvel**, Washington correspondent **John Nichols**, publisher emeritus **Victor Navasky**, and many more special guests soon to be announced!

The post-election cruise will be a unique opportunity to exchange ideas in the aftermath of a historic election year with a dynamic and eclectic cast of progressive opinion leaders.

Dave Zirin

The Nation's sports editor



7-night

Western Caribbean cruise

Holland America Line:
MS Oosterdam

Departing from Tampa, Florida, and cruising to:

Key West, Florida	Mahogany Bay, Honduras	Santo Tomás de Castilla, Guatemala	Costa Maya, Mexico
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GENDER ROLLS

The Impact of Women in Government

More women in government can have, as Katha Pollitt describes at right, a real but hard-to-measure impact on legislation that supports women's rights. A paper produced at the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions suggests that in America, more women in Congress means more female-friendly legislation is proposed, but not necessarily passed.

In the United States, **female legislators introduce** more women's-rights bills than men.

Democratic men in government office are stronger advocates of women's-rights bills than Republican men or women.

Men have higher success rates in getting women's-rights bills passed than women do, but don't tend to prioritize them.

Issues that women care about most, such as civil rights, labor, health, and education, are typically dismissed in the male-dominated Congress.

—Natalie Pattillo



M. Smith



B. Mikulski



K. Gillibrand



S. Chisholm

Katha Pollitt



Wanted: Women in Power

How do Bernie supporters think we should get gender parity in government?

Margaret Thatcher, Sarah Palin, Michele Bachmann: Whenever you suggest that more women leaders would be a good thing for women, someone is sure to wheel out these ladies in rebuttal. Point taken: Electing reactionary antifeminist women will not improve life for other women. It may not even improve life for other women politicians: In her 11 years as prime minister, Thatcher had only one woman in her cabinet. It may be true that any woman who wields electoral power dents the stereotype of women as incompetent, weak, and hormone-ruled. Say what you will about Thatcher, she put an end to that nonsense. Still, it's safe to assume that few feminists would vote for her—or Palin or Bachmann—in order to reap this vague psychological benefit.

Nonetheless, when feminists argue that we need more women in government, both women and men—including feminists who have chosen a male candidate—deride them as “vagina voters” practicing “identity politics.” For reasons I don't fully understand, only stone racists mock people of color who support candidates of their own ethnicity. Obama wouldn't have won without overwhelming black support; indeed, the large majority of African Americans in Congress represent mostly black districts, many of them created specifically to achieve that result. It'll be a long time before we see white progressives arguing that the underrepresentation of people of color at every level of government isn't important because white progressives have better politics—and anyway, what about Marion Barry?

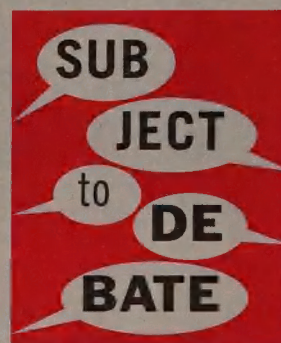
There are, it would seem, no penis voters, no identity politics for men. As Sanders put it: “No one has ever heard me say, ‘Hey, guys, let's stand together—vote for a man.’ I would never do that, never have.” Oh, Bernie, Bernie, Bernie. I'll work my heart out for you if you win the nomination, but let's be serious: When the whole system has been set up by men for men since the founding of the Republic, and when men are still 81 percent of Congress, 75 percent of state legislatures, 88 percent of governorships, and 100 percent of US presidents over the past 230 years, there is no need to mention your unmentionables.

More women in government benefits women. Is that such a wild thing to say? It's not a tidy one-

to-one calculation. Rwanda boasts the world's best representation of women, with 58 percent, but President Paul Kagame runs the show. Mexico, in seventh place, tops all of the Scandinavian countries but Sweden (where women are 44 percent of Parliament). Afghanistan (27 percent) beats the United States (just 19 percent), although few of those Afghan women have real power. But if you look only at the stable democracies, there's a rough pattern: Women legislators tend to be clustered in the more progressive parties and to promote “women's issues”—health, education, childcare, fighting discrimination and violence against women—more than male legislators do. Without the women of Congress (including Republican Senator Margaret Chase Smith), sex discrimination wouldn't have been included in the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Shirley Chisholm pushed for the creation of WIC. Barbara Mikulski fought for the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act. Kirsten Gillibrand took on sexual assault in the military.

Women should have 50 percent of power in every area of life, if not more (reparations!). It's simple justice. As I've written in previous columns, I believe that electing Hillary Clinton would promote that goal, but let's say you agree with my colleagues Liza Featherstone and Sarah Leonard and think Bernie would do a better job for women. It's certainly arguable. So what's your plan for gender equality in government? Left to its own devices, the system moves at a glacial pace: At the rate we're going, we won't achieve parity until global warming has melted all the glaciers. Simply vowing to do better won't work—that's what people always say, and what they may even think they're doing. It's just that in every actual case, the best candidate, strangely, happens to be a man.

Hillary supporters are mocked for emphasizing the question of women's representation in government. I agree that it's not the only thing at stake:



Chisholm pushed to create WIC.

Mikulski fought for family and medical leave.

Gillibrand took on sexual assault in the military.

Winning the White House also matters. But I'm assuming that Bernie supporters believe in gender fairness and equality, just as I do, so apart from expressing their longing to vote for Elizabeth Warren (who isn't running), how do they think we should get to 50/50? How about a system in which the Democrats nominate only women to fill open seats for the next 20 years, and governors nominate only women to fill vacancies? They could do something similar with race: There are only two black senators now in office, and only nine have served in all of our sorry history. (Demographically, there should be 13 or more. Reparations!)

If that's too extreme, we could take a page from Ireland. Long a boys' club, with two entrenched major parties that differed little politically, until last week Ireland had one of the lowest percentages of women in Parliament among European countries: 15 percent. In 2011, though, it set up a system in which, to receive public campaign funds, each party had to put forward a slate of candidates that was at

least 30 percent female. That meant finding women—lots of women—who'd been overlooked and sidelined in favor of men, and making sure they had the wherewithal for successful campaigns. The result? Women now comprise 22 percent of the Irish Parliament, despite the heavy losses among incumbents as voters expressed their rage at austerity and broken promises. The quotas also energized women as voters and activists for abortion rights, gender equality, and support for women and children.

True, Ireland has a complicated system of proportional voting, which helped. And it's hard to imagine Americans accepting such a quota because, as Sanders pointed out, we want to believe so strongly in desexualized and deracialized individual merit. Still, as long as he's trying to turn the United States into Denmark, why not turn it a little bit Irish too? What say you, Bernie brothers and sisters? ■

Katha Pollitt is a Puffin Foundation Writing Fellow at the Nation Institute.



Four years ago today, a child was stolen from his family and his future. Florida didn't call it "murder," but we do. #RIPTrayvon Martin

@Jamilah Lemieux, writer and *Ebony* senior editor Jamilah Lemieux, on the anniversary of Trayvon Martin's death and the birth of a movement

SNAPSHOT/IGOR PALKIN

Patriarch of the Penguins

Russian Orthodox Church Patriarch Kirill of Moscow poses with a new congregation in Antarctica on February 17. The patriarch visited a Russian research station that features the only permanent church at the South Pole. He remarked that the "Antarctic is the only place where there are no weapons [or] military activities."



CHRISTIE AS TRUMP'S VEEP?

If Chris and Donald form a team,
Would many voters pick it?
Could there be folks who might support
A schoolyard-bullies ticket?

Calvin Taddio
Deadline Poet

BACK ISSUES/1965

Welcome to Fake-town

In *The Nation's* centenary issue, novelist John Oliver Killens wrote about being a black writer in Hollywood and attacked the film industry's racist attitudes toward African Americans in general. "Hollywood is Fake-town, the great city of make-believe," Killens wrote. "Here are the true head-shrinkers and brainwashers of America."

Hollywood, he continued, "has been responsible for the glorification of the South, past and present, and for creating the image of black inferiority.... The men of Fake-town have brainwashed America and the entire world with the brush of white supremacy."

"I accuse Hollywood of being the most anti-Negro influence in this nation in the 20th century.... Hollywood makes great pretensions of doing controversial movies. But the great debate



in America today is *Negro freedom*. This is the fundamental controversy. How does the Negro artist break through this wall of censorship? We black writers and performing artists are ready to pool our creative strength to make our statements to our country. Where are the big-talking liberals?"

"Ironically," Killens concluded, "the American Negro, at whom Hollywood has eternally aimed her fire, has been the least vulnerable of all Americans, the least brainwashed. That is why we will be the basic folk to free this country."

—Richard Kreitner



OUR BOTTOMLESS WELL



Digging

have been
local well
other

After years of warfare among the country's organized criminal gangs, El Salvador's only forensic investigator finds that some kinds of evidence are almost impossible to unearth.

by ÓSCAR MARTÍNEZ



There are bodies down there. Not prosecutors, not gang members, not journalists, not policemen, not even the government doubts that in this exact spot, deep below ground level, there are bodies. And now that everybody knows, the question remains: What do we do? This is the story of a well—and of the country that surrounds it.

At the bottom of the well there are bodies. Maybe 10, maybe 12, maybe as many as 20. Definitely there are at least four. Entering into the small city of Turín in western El Salvador, if you continue on the dirt road, cross the train tracks, pass by the mud house, and keep going through the cornfield, you'll come to the well. At the bottom of the well, there are bodies.

December 2010

A man straps himself into a harness. He anchors a rope to a tree, hangs an oxygen tank on his back, and takes up his flashlight. Then he drops down into the well. Darkness envelops him. He descends. Ten meters. Twenty meters. Thirty. The well is deeper than he thought. He figured it would be about 30 meters deep, about the depth of another well in the area he dove into a few months back. Forty meters. Fifty. Fifty-five, and then the man touches water at the bottom. He turns on his light. He sees socks, clothes, junk, a collection of bones, feet, toes. He gives the signal to come back up. The well is too old and seems too fragile to do any straight-down pick-and-shovel excavating. But it's clear now: There are bodies in the bottom of the well.

The man's name is Israel Ticas, and he's the only working forensic investigator in the entire country, as well as the only person to descend into the well. There is nobody else but him in the entire country working to dig up graves, uncover bodies, and send the evidence to the courts.

In November 2010, testimonies from two gang members came together to tell a single story about the well. One of the members was from the Hollywood Locos Salvatrucha clique. The other was from the Parvis Locos Salvatrucha. They were both part of the Mara Salvatrucha in the state of Ahuachapán. Both of the men turned against their own gangs. Neither of them have ever been to the United States, which means they wouldn't know where to find Hollywood Boulevard or Park View Street (bordering Los Angeles's MacArthur Park), which gave the cliques their names. Both of the young men are from outside of Turín, from the hills, the countryside. Both of their testimonies coincided exactly: Turning off the highway into Turín, following the dirt road, crossing over the train

At the bottom of the well, he would uncover his biggest challenge since he began digging up mass graves.



180 feet under: The well in Turín that could contain the bodies of as many as 20 people killed by gang violence.

Óscar Martínez writes for ElFaro.net, the first online newspaper in Latin America.

tracks, passing by the mud shack, and then turning left on the next dirt path you come to, which is just wide enough for a car, and driving on past the cornfield, there you will see a field open up before you, where there is a jocote tree, a rudimentary sink, and a well. At the bottom of this well, there are bodies.

In early December 2010, investigators came to Turín for the first time. That was when Ticas dropped down into the well to confirm the testimonies of the young men, knowing that at the bottom he would uncover his greatest challenge since he began his work of digging up mass graves.

January 3, 2011

Excavate at a 45-degree angle. That's Ticas's Plan A. They'll have to dig for the bodies; they can't just pull them up. And instead of digging straight down, they'll have to open up a 30-yard-wide hole 100 yards from the well and then shoot at a 45-degree angle to the bottom, aiming straight for the bodies. Once the tunnel hits the wall of the well, they'll knock a hole through to gain access to the cadavers and drag out everything they find.

The Ministry of Public Works (MOP) loans Ticas the necessary equipment: a backhoe and a couple of dump trucks. Today is the first day of digging.

January 27, 2011

Bad news. Two cold fronts in a row set off a series of disasters, mostly in the interior of the country. The MOP needs its machines back. Ticas is left without help. In the first 24 days of digging, he was able to descend 10 of the 55 meters. He was happy. At that pace, he would finish digging before the wet season, which is the worst time to dig up bodies in El Salvador. In the wet season, when you dig, the rain fills back in. You empty, the rain floods.

Even reinforcing the walls of your holes won't keep the rain out. Without a backhoe or a digger, it's going to be impossible. The MOP said they only needed their machines for a few days, to do some damage control and reconstruction, and then they'd send them back to Turín.

February, March, April, May, June, July, August, September, October, November 2011

The MOP doesn't give the machines back. The 10 meters of progress remain only 10 meters. A single policeman keeps guard over a hole nobody is bothering with. For nine months, the guard moves himself in and out of the shade, standing watch. Ticas goes to the prosecutor of Ahuachapán, who tries to convince the minister of defense to loan out some new equipment, but nothing happens. The wooden cap to the well is



replaced by a cement seal. Ticas tries advertising on his Facebook account: looking for a backhoe, a dump truck, anything to help him dig some dead bodies out of a well in Turín. He'd be grateful for the hand.

December 23, 2011

El Niño Hollywood, of the Hollywood Locos Salvatrucha clique, is one of the witnesses whose testimony led Ticas to the well. The 30-year-old loves to talk. He even likes to talk with prosecutors, though when he does so, he cuts down on his colorful adjectives and skips over the guts and the gore. He likes it when prosecutors bring him other ex-gang members and they sit down and talk about comrades who died in the war against Barrio 18. He tries to impress people with his memory, his ability to read people and interpret candle flames, his knowledge of witchcraft. He's been living in a shack down the street from the police station in El Refugio since 2009, and he's the key witness in the case against his boss, Chepe Furia. Today is the first day a journalist visits his little shack, and El Niño settles into his role as storyteller.

We talk for three hours. El Niño tells me how he joined the MS in '94, and then he tells me how many murders he's committed, how many murders he's witnessed, and how many he's heard about. He talks about drugs, extortion, death threats, traitors, corrupt cops, and friendly judges. He tells me how a traitor can destroy an entire clique. He tells me how his own gang killed his brother. Another clique within the MS thought his brother, known as El Cheje, was a traitor. So they killed him. And then the murderers tried to kill El Niño so they wouldn't leave an enraged hit man on the loose. They tried to *take him for a walk* (and this is the most important phrase, *taking someone for a walk*, in his story), but it ended up being El Niño who *took them for a walk* instead.

When a gang member *takes you for a walk*, they trick you into accompanying them to some place where they kill you. Let's go grab a drink. Let's go visit that place. Let's go kill what's-his-name. That's when they pull the gun on you. Let's go smoke a jay by the well in Turín.

He starts telling me about clique exchanges. When a gang member is hunted by the police in the clique's territory, he gets shipped out to a clique in an-

Sisyphus in El Salvador: Israel Ticas, the country's only forensic investigator.

There are an estimated 25,000 gang members in El Salvador, with another 9,000 in prison as of 2011.

other territory to work there for a while. That's where he *chills*, El Niño explains.

He tells me that his clique worked exchanges with other cliques, and that he himself would get moved to San Salvador sometimes, to *chill*, but that members who would get sent over to Hollywood territory didn't necessarily need to chill. Rather, they came because that's where the wells were.

"They came 'cause they figured there were skeletons in these wells. They'd bring homeboys or *bichas* [rivals] that they were *taking for a walk*, or homeboys that couldn't handle their shit, and they'd bring them to our wells, 'cause we have wells here. The Turín well is the one I gave up. The one in Atiquizaya was already filled up. I didn't give that one up because that was from the old days, from homeboys that are already dead, so what's the point? In the one in Turín, shit.... I myself know of four skeletons."

March 12, 2012

"I'm standing here with my hands folded. I wish it weren't so deep and I could just dig it myself with a shovel and a pick, but nope."

Ticas is frustrated. He doesn't have anything to do. For 20 minutes, he paces around the well and then stops and says, "See? The same 10 meters." He points his finger at the excavated hole descending diagonally down toward the bottom of the well. "Digging in the winter is too dangerous. I've seen it before. The dirt on top mixes with all this stuff below and turns into sludge. Then it buries everything under all that sedimentation."

He sits down next to the well, looking at his hole, the cadavers deep below him.

"I feel hopeless. Duped. As public prosecutors, we've tried everything we could to combat this impunity. There are more than 15 people down there. I'm sure of it. That's what the detectives have been telling me."

For the past month, Ticas has had a backhoe at his disposal. The Engineers Command of the Armed Forces—the only agency that has paid any attention to the Ahuachapán public prosecutors—loaned him the backhoe. But it doesn't do a thing for him if he doesn't have a couple of dump trucks to go with it. A single backhoe, scooping up one scoop, climbing out of the hole, driving 100 yards and then getting back in the hole, over and over again, isn't worth the time or the gas.

"I'll say it again," Ticas says, as if his request will bear some new weight now that he's been saying it for the whole year: "A backhoe and two trucks. A backhoe and two trucks. A backhoe and two trucks...."

It's worth remembering one other detail. A year ago, in January of 2011, Ticas had everything he needed, and in just 24 days he was able to dig down 10 yards. As the well is 55 meters deep, if he had been able to keep digging at that same pace, he would have dug down to the bodies 10 months ago.

April 3, 2012

"You seen the sink that's close to that well?" El Niño asks



me from his little backyard garden. He's inspecting the radishes he's growing.

I have seen it. Someone had installed a basic sink, probably to carry water from the well where they could wash clothes under the jocote tree. That sink is the setting for El Niño's story, the story of a murder, the story of how every murder story in this country has a backstory. This backstory, however, is difficult to describe: In the gang war, if you're not in the middle of it, a lot of it doesn't seem to make sense.

An example: Members of El Niño's clique once killed an aspiring member because instead of saying he was *pedo*, or high, after smoking marijuana, he said that he was *peda*, the feminine version of the same word. The clique took the mistake as a terrible offense because everything they do is masculine and everything the enemy does is feminine. So they killed him, stabbed him to death on the spot. It's hard to understand. Wells don't get filled up with bodies killed for strategic reasons; there isn't even criminal logic to many of the murders in this country. There are bones in the bottom of wells for one simple reason: animal violence. Can I kill? Yes. Can I hide the body? Yes. Will it be hard for authorities to find the body? Yes. Will I be looked on by fellow gang members as courageous? Yes. Thus, I kill. And after a few kills, I get used to killing. Killing becomes part of everyday life. Thus, little by little, wells get filled.

The story El Niño tells is a story of a young man named Ronal Landaverde, the brother of El Gringo, who was—or so El Niño and his fellow clique members suspected—an infiltrator from Barrio 18. Ronal wanted to be a *salvatracho*. He started smoking with some of the members. The *salvatruchos* let him smoke until, one day, they changed their minds. They led him to the well in Turín where, they realized, none of them had remembered to bring a pistol. They poked around the area until, next to the sink, they found a cord used to hang clothes; they strangled Ronal with the cord. "Not with a knife," El Niño explains. "Because we didn't want blood in the well."

Reason inside madness.

The body of Ronal is one of the four being looked for by state prosecutors, thanks to the testimony of El Niño. For those four bodies, prosecutors brought charges against 43 members of three different cliques who had been caught after a series of interrogations. All 43 were arrested in October 2010, which means that by October 2012, if nobody pulls the bodies out of the well, all the detained men, having served the maximum amount of time in jail without being sentenced, will be released. But it's not just those four bodies. Prosecutors expect to turn up many more. They've received information that the well was used as a body dump by various cliques: Los Angeles, Parvis, Hollywood, Acajutlas, Pride Gangsters, and Fulton.

May 25, 2012

Ticas is in a good mood. He's been up and down, but now he feels good. At the beginning of April, he convinced the MOP to give him back the backhoe, the two trucks, and

This article is adapted from chapter six of Martínez's latest book, A History of Violence: Living and Dying in Central America (Verso), available March 8.

**Every hour,
one person is
murdered in El
Salvador;
6,657
people were
murdered
there
in 2015, up
70%
from 2014.**

Lockdown:
El Salvador's
Cojutepeque Prison
numbers over 1,000
inmates, many
of them members
of the country's
powerful gangs.

the dump truck. At the end of April, however, they took back all the trucks. All he had left was the backhoe—useless on its own. But then, just a week ago, a surprise: Rumbling past the cornfield one day are three trucks, a dump truck, and a bulldozer. The Army and the MOP teamed up to find him what he needed. The wet season is still thrusting its head about, but Ticas is optimistic.

"We're going to finish before they let [the accused gang members] out this time. We'll be done by October."

August 21, 2012

The well is becoming a metaphor for the country: The deeper you dig, the worse things get. The longer you wait to solve a problem, the worse the problem becomes.

The well has flooded. The rains came and flooded everything. When it was all ready to go, only 18 more meters left to dig of "the damn well," as Ticas now refers to it, it flooded.

The rains fucked up the good summer stats, too. With consistent showers over three months, Ticas only dug 27 yards. Thirty-seven in total.


This is what happens when you let a problem fester: The solution doesn't stay the same. He has all the tools that he needed before. But now he needs a new tool: something to pump out the water.

And yet Ticas is optimistic. He thinks he'll hit the bottom in a month and a half, and that by October, DNA tests will prove that the gangsters are guilty. He's excited that they might find even more bodies down there. He heard that an informant, who used to be part of a gang of kidnappers, said that when they get to the bottom, "they're going to be surprised."

October 30, 2012

Ticas is working other cases now. Other cadavers. He's dug up a few young men from Soyapango, in the middle of the country, a few women from Santa Ana in the west. Meanwhile, the rains are soaking everything in





Turín. It's impossible to dig. The pump came in too late. Everybody is asking for their machines back. The backhoe, the dump trucks—they're all returned.

All work at the well in Turín has come to a standstill. Nobody is digging up the dead.

Six of the gangsters, after being locked up for two years waiting for something that would never happen, are due to be released.

Ticas, once again, is frustrated.

"Imagine if each of those we let out kills somebody else, or maybe two other people. How many would that be?"

Then he repeats that he would have liked to have dug it all himself with a pick and a shovel.

Maybe he's hit on something: That's who we are as a country, a man with a pick and a shovel trying to dig up our dead, and yet unable to dig deep enough to save them.

Early February 2013

The regional chief of the attorney general's office, Mario Jacobo, confirms that representatives of the state asked for provisional dismissal of charges for those accused of dumping the bodies into the well. He says it's a strategy in order to get another year to keep digging, that they've been able to pin two of the bodies on the six gangsters about to be released, and that they're positive there are at least five bodies in the well, if not many more. He hopes that by the end of this month, they will get to the "exact point where forensic investigator Ticas wants to be." *After over a year of work*, he would have been able to add.

The chief prosecutor says that provisional dismissal is a "strategy," but in Salvadoran courts, many describe it as "dismiss me and never see me again."

February 2, 2013

The media latches back onto the story with headlines like 20 BODIES FOUND IN TURÍN WELL and OUR BOTTOMLESS WELL. Articles describe a change that people have been

unable to explain: The depth of the well isn't the same as it used to be; it is now only 42 meters deep. Water has been leaking in from somewhere. Maybe the digging cracked into a new vein of groundwater. Whatever happened, Ticas is now only five meters from reaching the supposed bottom.

In one of the articles, the head of the MOP, Gerson Martínez, is interviewed about his agency's role in the excavation: "The MOP has an agreement with Public Security to collaborate as much as possible." He later adds: "It is a contribution, on the part of MOP, to combat the impunity in this country."

February 27, 2013

El Niño gave testimony yesterday against 19 members of the Hollywood Locos Salvatrucha clique for committing acts of murder, though none of it relates to the well. Prosecutors claim all that's left is to get to the bottom of the well and determine a court date for the accused, but nobody knows if they will still be in custody at that point, after two and a half years in prison and still without being taken to court. El Niño says he's tired of going to court and talking so much.

**El Salvador
received
39
out of
100
points on
Transparency
International's
2015 index,
indicating
serious
corruption.**

March 30, 2013

Ticas is only four meters from the bottom, four meters away from digging down 42 meters to the bottom. Almost there, he feels a new fear: that he himself will die inside the well. The digging isn't dry anymore. It's more like digging through a muddy swamp. It's not raining, but water is coming up from below. A subterranean seep, leaking from the walls, bursting with every scoop of the shovel. Despite the danger, and the fear, Ticas is also thrilled, seeing light in the damp darkness.

"We expect to find a tall, thin man from Santa Ana who was thrown in along with his laptop."


His new hypothesis is that they will find the first body at a depth of 39 meters and the last, which they have located with prods, opening small holes that are quickly filled back in with water, at a depth of 42 meters. Below that, says Ticas, "Who knows?"

This is Plan B. Or maybe it's actually Plan C. Or maybe even Plan Z. It's all that's left for him. From the wall of dirt directly in front of Ticas to the well shaft where the bodies are, there are eight more meters. Eight meters straight ahead. Ticas now wants to start digging from above again, from about 30 meters down, digging a five-meter-wide hole heading diagonally into the well shaft. Then, once the prosecutors find him scuba gear, he can drop right into the dark swamp at the bottom of the well, right into that soup of earth and bones.

April 1, 2013

He still hasn't reached the bottom. Today marks 805 days since authorities discovered bodies in the well. Twenty-eight months. This is what we know: At the bottom of the well, there are bodies. Maybe 10, maybe 12, maybe as many as 20. But definitely there are at least four.

Entering into the small city of Turín in western El Salvador, if you continue on past the dirt road, cross the train tracks, pass the mud house, and continue on through the cornfield, you'll come to an open field with a jocote tree, and next to the tree is the well. At the bottom of the well, there are bodies. This is all we know. ■



Last night
Young gangsters
carry the coffin of
a fallen member of
their clique

Who is **HILLARY CLINTON?**

Two Decades of Answers From the Left



INTRODUCTION BY KATHA POLLITT
EDITED BY RICHARD KREITNER



**A MUST-READ FOR THE
2016 ELECTION SEASON**

How fast-paced standardized testing

has created a new glass ceiling.

by ANDREW HACKER



83 SECONDS

HARDLY A WEEK GOES BY WITHOUT A PANEL, CONFERENCE, OR symposium on luring women into STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) careers. Even the president has joined in: “We’ve got half the population that is way underrepresented in those fields.” He has his numbers right. Women currently receive less than a fifth of all bachelor’s degrees in physics, computer science, and engineering. In the last national count, only 8,851 women had majored in mathematics and statistics.

We’ve heard most of the reasons, not least hostility in laboratories. But a more central cause became apparent as I began researching the teaching and testing of mathematics. Standardized testing in math, where women do significantly worse than men, is setting women back before they even begin college. Since mathematics is the first hurdle for STEM fields, women are unlikely to sign on if they’ve already been told that they don’t measure up. We know that the problem is the test. It’s not the students, because girls and women are getting better grades than boys and men in high-school and college mathematics courses. Without changing our methods for measuring ability, we stand little chance of changing the gender imbalance among our scientists and engineers.

The importance we assign to standardized tests is eclipsing that of assessments by sentient teachers. Each year, more weight is given to scores disgorged by the ACT and the SAT, backstopped by the GRE, MCAT, and

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LSAT, not to mention standardized Common Core tests, which are given over to firms like Pearson and McGraw-Hill. Computer-awarded scores are touted as objective, whereas grades bestowed by teachers are seen as subjective, if not tainted by biases. (An ACT study intimated that the principal victims of prejudice were boys.)

On last year’s SAT, boys averaged 527 in the mathematics section against 496 for girls—a far wider gulf than elsewhere in the test. The ACT’s gap is smaller, largely because its test is closer to what schools actually teach, but boys are still visibly ahead. In fact, a more reliable gauge is performance in high school before they take tests and in college courses afterward. I did some calculations to see what would happen if the SAT’s mathematics scores reflected classroom grades. If that were the case, girls would not only erase their current 31-point deficit, but would move 32 points ahead of their male classmates. With the ACT, they would gain 28 points and also pass the boys. (I’ve converted ACT scores here to the SAT range.)

Since we know that girls and women are just as intelligent and adaptable as boys and men, why aren’t they faring equally well with an instrument that has been in place for over half a century? I turned to Marcia Linn at the University of California, Berkeley, who has studied grades and scores for over 20 years, especially gender dif-

ferences in mathematics. “Females turn out to be better course takers,” she has concluded; “males turn out to be better test takers.” She notes that boys are more apt to take physics and computer science, which sharpen quantitative and spatial skills. And more college-aspiring girls come from lower-income homes with fewer resources for tutoring. But what ultimately separates the scores, Linn says, is the “tendency of girls to be more conscientious than boys.”

Diligence pays off in complex class assignments, which results in higher grades. But pausing to ponder can spell death in multiple-choice testing, since speed is crucial for a high score. The ACT’s 60 mathematics problems must be assessed and answered in 60 minutes, although a more generous SAT, set to start this spring, allots 83 seconds. Given the ticking clock, the tests openly advise swift skimming and blind guessing. Hence this advice from Axiom Learning, a coaching company: “It’s Not What You Know, It’s How Fast You Can Show It.”

I next conferred with Jonathan Chiu, who oversees Princeton Review’s tutorial services. He began by saying that he warns girls not to double-check their answers, because that wastes crucial seconds. Girls tend to “over-analyze” the options, he added, while boys cotton to the idea that there is “only one right answer.” The ACT and the SAT concede that it’s not possible to truly solve all of their problems in the allotted time. So along with speed, there’s what some coaches call “stabbing,” which can yield precious points. Suppose you know the bell is about to ring, and you have 10 items still to go. Chiu recommends that you not even read them, but simply stab a bubble for each one. He says that girls are more apt to feel it’s not honest to fill in answers if you haven’t done the questions. A venerable College Board study found they were 12 times more likely to leave the bubbles blank because they weren’t sure. Chiu notes that too many girls enter the tests feeling their knowledge is being weighed, while boys perceive them as contests to be gamed. The keys to a successful score are an impulsive pace, brazen confidence, and a cynical view of the entire enterprise.

LET US CONSIDER ONE OUTCOME OF THESE tests. Each year, the National Merit Scholarship Corporation induces some 1.6 million high-school juniors to vie for its 7,400 awards. It purports to be a national talent search, funded by companies like McDonald’s, Boeing, and Lorillard Tobacco, eager to show a social commitment. While NMS releases reams of data, it steadfastly refuses to provide gender breakdowns, either for its initial pool of entrants or the final winners. When I asked for a few figures, an NMS spokesperson replied that the company didn’t keep them because gender “is not used in the selection process.”

So I did some digging of my own. NMS awards are based almost entirely on the PSAT, an abridged version of the SAT. In recent years, girls have comprised 53 percent of those taking this test. (NMS never mentions this figure.) The PSAT does release its ranges of scores, where its three parts—reading, writing, and mathematics—get equal weight. In fact, the genders are just a point or so apart in reading and writing. But the difference in mathematics is striking, with twice as many boys landing in the top tier. This edge boosts them overall, and it seems valid to surmise that discernibly more boys will be getting NMS scholarships. (In fact, if we had reading and writing

results that mirrored classroom accomplishment, girls’ scores would be substantially higher than the boys.)

NMS also declines to print a list of its ultimate winners. However, it does release the names of each state’s “semifinalists,” the penultimate draw. I chose Ohio as a sample state and examined its 626 names to identify them by gender. (Some of the names were androgynous or unfamiliar to me, so I split them evenly.) I found that girls comprised 47 percent of Ohio’s NMS semifinalists. Here, too, it was the standardized mathematics scores that brought girls, who started as 53 percent of the entrants, down to 47 percent of the NMS awardees. Here, the PSAT’s gender bias results in more boys than girls receiving national recognition, not to mention money for college.

Consider another outcome of biased testing: More men than women are admitted to top-tier schools, even though 57 percent of the bachelor’s degrees awarded nationwide go to women. At Stanford and Yale, for example, less than half of their undergraduates are women. Here’s the reason: These elite colleges demand that most of the students they admit have SAT scores of at least 700 (or above 33 on the ACT) on both the reading and, more decisively, the mathematics segment. What Yale, Stanford, and others know is that women make up only 38 percent of the SAT’s 700-plus mathematics pool and 34 percent of the ACT’s 33-plus circle. As a result, more men are routinely deemed to have the dossier these colleges seek. Might these colleges be worried about their public image if women began to outnumber men on their campuses, producing a large gender imbalance?

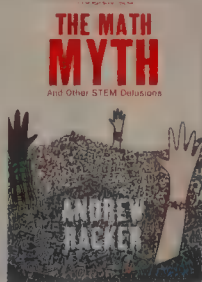
So what’s to be done? Machine-graded testing is so entrenched that about all we get is tinkering. (SAT items now have four choices instead of five.) In the past, questions involving the torque of racing cars were deemed sexually biased. It’s hard to find anything slanted quite so obviously today. If more mathematics problems can be attuned to today’s girls and women, there should be efforts to include them. But we shouldn’t delude ourselves that female-friendly wording will turn the tide.

The generally accepted antidote follows Henry Higgins’s plea (here faintly amended) in *My Fair Lady*: “Why Can’t Women Be More Like Men?” This is a patent premise in coaching courses. Kaplan has even produced a special “Study Guide for Girls.” Essentially, they’re told to forget what got them A’s in their mathematics classes and urged instead to deliberate less on questions, answer even if they don’t know, and tackle the test as a game to be outwitted.

Is that what we want? If anything, I would have supposed we want to encourage young people—nascent adults—to be thoughtful. And that entails taking your time, not taking shortcuts. But the real charge against our testing imperium is how it blatantly slights the talents of half our society, just when girls and women are revealing abilities that match or surpass those of boys and men. That they are denied their share of seats at selective schools and colleges, and of corporate-sponsored scholarships, should be broadly known and reproached. Setting 83 seconds for advanced algebra problems as the key to attending Yale is to sustain yet another ceiling for women. ■

“Females turn out to be better course takers, and males turn out to be better test takers.”

—Marcia Linn, UC Berkeley



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Written Off

Veteran newspaper
journalists are a
dying breed. That's
bad for journalism —
and democracy.

by DALE MAHARIDGE





ARTHUR MILLER'S CLASSIC 1949 PULITZER PRIZE-WINNING play *Death of a Salesman* opens with musical direction: "A melody is heard, played upon a flute. It is small and fine, telling of grass and trees and the horizon. The curtain rises." The play follows Willy Loman, past 60, as his grasp on life crumbles amid job troubles. When, at the end of Act II, he reaches his beaten-down end, the melody soars again, this time a requiem. "Only the music of the flute," writes Miller, "is left on the darkening stage...."

I heard this flute's dirge throughout last summer and fall, as I made the rounds talking with downsized journalists—men and women who had gotten hooked on the profession as young, ink-stained idealists, only to find themselves cast out in mid- or later life. These veterans spoke of forced buyouts and failed job searches—of lost purpose, lost confidence, even lost homes. I had known of the decimation of my profession: I'd read the statistics, seen the news articles, watched old friends pushed from jobs as bureau chiefs, editors, senior reporters, into the free fall of freelance. But the texture of their Lomanesque despair surprised me. There were some grim moments.

Summer 2015, the West Coast: I'm chatting with a long-time friend, a great investigative reporter who was pushed out of a big-city daily. She's managed to land a new, well-paying job—but it's not in journalism. A mutual colleague told me that "it's the most hated job she never wanted to do." I insist that my friend needs to find a way back someday, because she has stunning reportorial talent. "I don't remember that person," she interrupts sharply.

Dale Maharidge, a journalism professor at Columbia University, was a newspaperman for 15 years. He's the author of 10 books, including Someplace Like America: Tales From the New Great Depression.

Early fall 2015, a bar on the East Coast: An unemployed middle-aged writer whose work I've admired for decades agrees to meet for a drink. I buy the first round, he gets the second. In between we talk about editors and writers we know in common, about stories nailed and those that got away. Typical journo stuff. "So what do you want?" he asks finally. I explain that I'm seeking the human angle behind the news of thousands of downsized journalists. "Am I the lead to your story?" he asks, sizing me up, tensing. I feel that I'm losing him. Thus a Hail Mary: "Are you depressed?" His fast retort: "Are you trying to piss me off?" He walks out, leaving a full beer on the table.

2009 to present, somewhere in the United States: An e-mail arrives with the subject "Journalist, with inquiry about homelessness." The sender thanks me for my 1985 book on the traveling homeless—because he's now one of them after losing a journalism job. "I'm riding my mt. bike west, temporarily camped out in Kingman [Arizona], and I have lived under many a bush and in a few hostels along the way. I am a homeless transient without any money. Three college degrees to boot.... So here I sit, at the public library computer, typing out my stories and thinking about what to do." We keep in touch for a while. Recent attempts to contact him end in failure.

THE TERM "SEISMIC SHIFT" IS OVERUSED, BUT IT APPLIES TO what's happened to American newspapers. In 2007, there were 55,000 full-time journalists at nearly 1,400 daily

papers; in 2015, there were 32,900, according to a census by the American Society of News Editors and the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at Florida International University. That doesn't include the buyouts and layoffs last fall, like those at the *Los Angeles Times*, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, and the *New York Daily News*, among others, and weeklies and magazines like *National Geographic*.

For most of the past century, journalists could rely on career stability. Newspapers were an intermediary between advertisers and the public; it was as if their presses printed money. The benefit of this near-monopoly was that newsrooms were heavily stocked with reporters and editors, most of them passionate about creating journalism that made a difference in their communities. It often meant union protection, lifetime employment, and pensions. Papers like the *Sacramento Bee* bragged to new hires in the 1980s that even during the Great Depression, the paper had never laid off journalists.

All of that is now yesterday's birdcage lining. The sprawling lattice of local newsrooms is shrinking—105 newspapers closed in 2009 alone—whittled away by the rise of the Internet and decline of display ads, with the migration of classified advertising to Craigslist hitting particularly hard. Between 2000 and 2007, a thousand newspapers lost \$5 billion to the free site, according to a 2013 study by Robert Seamans of New York University's Stern School of Business and Feng Zhu of the Harvard Business School. Falling circulation numbers have also taken their toll.

And things may get a lot worse, according to former *Los Angeles Times* executive Nicco Mele. "If the next three years look like the last three years, I think we're going to look at the 50 largest metropolitan papers in the country and expect somewhere between a third to a half of them to go out of business," said Mele, now a professor at USC's Annenberg School of Journalism, in an interview a few weeks ago with the Shorenstein Center at Harvard University.

Meanwhile, what remains of print journalism is shifting, morphing into a loose web of digital outfits populated by a corps of underpaid young freelancers and keyboard hustlers, Twitter fiends and social-media soothsayers. Gone are the packed newsrooms. And gone, in many cases, are the older journalists.

"Perhaps I've missed it, but has anyone done a story on how the newsroom layoffs of the past decade have been one of the greatest exercises in age discrimination in U.S. history?" asked R.G. Ratcliffe, who spent 33 years at papers ranging from the *Houston Chronicle* to *The Florida Times-Union*, in a 2012 comments thread on the media site JimRomenesko.com.

Some journalists have pursued age-discrimination lawsuits, but the cases are hard to make stick. In 2012, *Connecticut Post* reporter Anne Amato, then 64, argued that the paper wanted to "rid itself of its older reporters." She lost in court. Last fall, a jury awarded \$7.1 million to former *Los Angeles Times* columnist T.J. Simers, 66. But early this year, the award was thrown out on appeal.

Part of the stated explanation for the exodus of veterans is cultural. Old-school journalism was a trade, and legacy journalists find today's brand of personality journalism, with its emphasis on churning out blog posts, aggregating the labor of others, and curating a constant social-media presence, to be simply foreign. And the higher-ups share the new bias. One editor of a major national publication, who himself is well over 40, confided to me that he's reluctant to hire older journalists,

that "they're stuck in the mentality of doing one story a week" and not willing to use social media.

Older journalists cost more as well, often making them the first to be let go or offered buyouts.

But the shift is also deeper and more systemic. Like the story of Willy Loman, cast aside in his creeping middle age, the tale of today's discarded journalists is, at its core, a parable of the way our economy, our whole American way of being, sucks people dry and throws them away as their cultural and economic currency wanes. Many older workers, not just journalists, are hurting. Amid the so-called recovery, some 45 percent of those seeking jobs over the age of 55 have been looking six months or longer, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

But there's one major difference between other workers and journalists—when the latter are laid off, the commonweal suffers. "You know who loves this new day of the lack of journalism? Politicians. Businessmen. Nobody's watching them anymore," says Russ Kendall, a lifelong photojournalist and editor who is now self-employed as a pizza maker.

There are still print newspapers—and news websites—producing heroic local journalism. But it's clear that the loss of a combined several hundred thousand years of experience from newsrooms across the country is hurting American democracy. Less known is the impact on this lost generation of talent, people at the peak of their skills—in their 40s and beyond, ill equipped to navigate the changed landscape. Their lives are intertwined with the story of the public good.

Many have changed careers and are doing well enough—on paper. Talk to them, however, and many say they miss the newsroom. Others soldier on, freelancing in a market of falling rates. Some drive for Uber; others lurch into early retirement, wondering if they'll make it.

Journalists often seek an emblematic person to illustrate a story. But sometimes there's no single through-line character. Sometimes there are 22,000 of them. These are a few of their stories.



“One thing I never contemplated was the end of newspapers. It's like burying someone you love.”

—Hilary Abramson

IN 1977, A SMALL OHIO DAILY HIRED ME AT A weekly net pay of \$90. In 1980, I drove to California seeking work. I lived out of my Datsun pickup, homeless, for three months, until *The Sacramento Bee* hired me. You could do that back then. In the newsroom, I was seated next to Hilary Abramson. She smoked little French cigars. Soon I was smoking cigars with her at our desks. You could also do that back then. I'd never met another reporter with so much energy: Abramson practically levitated.

Through the 1980s, I overheard Abramson as she reported on topics ranging from police abuse to a county poorhouse program that was declared unconstitutional by the California Supreme Court as a result of her exposé. She wrote the first major profile of Rush Limbaugh, then just a local radio personality. After the 1980s, she went on to be managing editor at the Pacific News Service, later a reporter funded by foundations. Then the money ran out. No one would hire her. She blames ageism. Like most of the journalists I interviewed, she said this was never spelled out, but rather implied. "I was told that I

was 'overqualified' for a few editing jobs," Abramson said when we sat down and talked last summer. "I considered that ageism at work. I would demand a realistic salary that younger journalists wouldn't expect."

Abramson, now 70, has freelanced. A magazine gave her an investigative assignment. When the contract came after months of work, it included a clause that "said absolutely all the liability was on me." The editor said the new policy was driven by lawyers.

"I was dealing with a controversial subject that could incur the wrath of an entity with very deep pockets. I had to let it go. I worked for free," she said. And the story never got told.

"I always knew right from the start I'd never be good working for myself. I'm not a businessperson—just let me do my work. Very few reporters I worked with were good on the business end. One thing I never contemplated was the end of newspapers. It's like burying someone you love. It paralyzes me, angers me. I just haven't found a way to go gently into the dark."

The days, she said, could be very bleak. "We were not prepared—even us, who spent years listening to people pour their hearts out when bad things happened to them. We thought it would never happen to us. We had our bliss. What made us think it would go on forever?"

HE'S 57 AND WORKED FOR A 20,000-circulation daily in the Midwest for over 30 years. He was bought out last summer; over a quarter of the reporters, photographers, and editors there were let go. Like many downsized journalists, he asked to remain anonymous because he had to sign away his right to free speech to get 18 weeks of settlement pay.

"In 10 minutes, I was done," he said of the meeting when he was told it was over. Being a pro, he worked the rest of the week to finish his assignments.

"I have a deep fear about what is happening to journalism. No one else is going to do what we do. In that way, we create a community. Television and radio only show up at the big things. They don't show up at school-board meetings, the local drainage board. If your community is going to cut trash collection to every other week, television is not going to come."

He wonders how long his former paper can survive, because the base of advertisers has shrunk.

"Who's making money off the web? No one is going to pay \$100 a week to get the newspaper—or whatever it costs, whatever advertising doesn't pay. But if it goes away, America is going to go, 'What the hell happened? We need that.'"

FOR MOST OF THE AUGHTS, John Koopman reported gritty stories in the spirit of Charles Bukowski, written like good Hemingway, for the *San Francisco Chronicle*. He spent

"I couldn't get called back from places I wouldn't have sneezed at when I was younger."

—John Koopman

nearly a year riding in police cars for a series called "The Badge." For "Skin," he immersed himself in the city's sex culture: strip joints, porn-film shoots, and clubs like Bondage A-Go-Go. He also embedded as a journalist with the US Marines in Iraq in three different years. He was nearly blown up twice, and saw a corporal 10 feet away from him shot dead by a sniper.

In 2009, the *Chronicle* dumped him, along with 30 other newsroom employees, on top of over 100 buyouts earlier that year. "I couldn't get called back from places I wouldn't have sneezed at when I was younger," Koopman said of the ageism he encountered when looking for new journalism work.

He had a wife and teenage son and couldn't move. "You do what you have to," he recalled, "pull on the big-boy britches and get to work." In 2011, he became the assistant general manager for the Hustler Club in San Francisco.

"I just wish I could've worked at the strip club before I became a journalist—I would have done a hell of a lot better job," said Koopman, who is now 57. "You learn more things about human nature in that kind of environment than you'd ever learn with a notebook in your hand."

His sense of social justice led him to make sure the women workers were treated with respect. He had to appear tough. Maybe it helped that he shaves his head bald. Fists were occasionally required when he threw out pimps and drug dealers. "I came to realize I was starting to have a really antisocial personality disorder," he confessed. He told of a disruptive customer he eighty-sixed. The man demanded to finish his sandwich. "I thought, 'What's the worst thing I can say?' So I said, 'I'll fuck your mother with that sandwich.'"

At the door, the man hurled the sandwich at Koopman, striking him in the leg. Had the customer not bolted, it would have been a "homicidal scene," Koopman said. "I sat in the office afterward thinking, 'My God, what the hell did I just do? I just told a guy I was gonna fuck his mother with his sandwich. Who am I? What kind of monster have I created here?'"

So he quit—it was 2013—and began driving for Uber. "I had a lot of rage," Koopman said of his initial frus-

Off the record:
The author takes a reporting break at *The Sacramento Bee*, circa the late 1980s.



tration with the infamously bad Bay Area traffic. Perhaps there was also lingering anger toward the *Chronicle's* executives. "I guess the way karma works is that you have to live with yourself. I can't be the one to bring justice to the karmic universe. But, God, I hope somebody does."

Before long, though, Koopman found Zen behind the wheel. He drives from 30 to 50 hours a week. "Nowadays, I'm like, 'Whatever.' Traffic doesn't bother me; it's either heavy or it's not. There's nothing you can do about it. It's almost like therapy."

Between Uber and his wife's income, "we make enough money to get by." Someday "Koop," as he's known to former colleagues, wants to write a book about his days at the strip club. Another book idea is about gays in the military. But right now he's ambivalent about the act of writing.

"I still love to tell stories. The way things have gone, I'm not sure how much I care if it gets out anymore. Sometimes life is more about what you do today—the relationships you have with people. Sometimes the story is just something you tell your son. Or it's something that you publish. As long as you're doing one of those things, it gets that beast expelled. I wish I were still working in a newspaper—I do. But at the same time, I might even be healthier today not doing it."

SINCE 2012, WHEN LESLEY GUTH EARNED A MASTER'S DEGREE in counseling psychology, she has spent her days sifting through other people's joys and struggles, trying to help make sense of them. It's a job that echoes her work in journalism, with its emphasis on listening, empathy, and interviewing people, but with one notable difference. "Being an older woman, my experience is valued as a therapist," said Guth, 55. Not so in the newsroom, which she left in 2009 after taking a buyout from the *San Francisco Chronicle*. "Being older and a woman is not valued in journalism."

Guth worked at 10 newspapers in her 20-plus years in the industry. At all of them, the majority of top editors "were older white men," and many of them have remained despite the cuts. "Journalism never reached equality for women or minorities."

Over the wide range of interviews I conducted, there was a strong sense that women are being downsized with greater frequency than men. "We have a lot of anecdotal information that indicates newspaper newsrooms have reverted back to older, whiter, and male-dominated," said Melissa Nelson, director of collective bargaining for the Newspaper Guild, in an e-mail. But there are no hard numbers, she added.

A bit of quantification came from Frederick Kunkle, the cochair of the Washington-Baltimore News Guild, who is also a reporter at *The Washington Post*. As part of a grievance proceeding, the paper provided "limited" numbers in 2012 for some 313 employees—but even that "flawed" set of data showed a pattern of management undermining women, as well as people age 40 and older. The employees were ranked on a scale of one to five, with one being the worst. Fifty-four percent of the group was over 40, but they made up 64 percent of those who scored below three. "Within the older age bracket with rankings below 3.0, women are targeted disproportionately," Kunkle said. "Fifteen women are ranked low, while 10 men are low-ranked." Conversely, 22 of the 33 who ranked over four were men "in a newsroom that is predominantly female."

One woman downsized from the *Post* told me that she "always got good reviews and often got raises" in all

of her years at the paper. Then, suddenly, her rankings were one and two. The day after a manager told her she was being let go, she won a journalism award.

IN 2012, WHEN PHOTO EDITOR RUSS KENDALL left *The Bellingham Herald* in Washington State—the last of his many journalism jobs—he started an artisanal-pizza company, Gusto Wood-Fired Pizza Catering. With a traveling oven, he sells his wares at markets and weddings. "I'm making twice what I made as a newspaper photographer."

And in 2014, Kendall founded a Facebook group called "What's Your Plan B?" It's "a site for journalists who have been laid off, haven't been laid off yet—which is everybody else—and those who have gone on to create a successful Plan B," he said. It now has over 6,200 members. "Somebody became a doctor. Somebody else started a coffee company in Washington, DC, that turns out to be one of Obama's favorite places."

Scrolling through posts on the site feels like an enormous group hug. Many members share a profound sense of lost purpose. Kendall described the attitude of many journo: "It's not just what I do—it's what I am. I certainly felt that way for a long time."

He's also irked by the greed of newspapers. For decades, Wall Street had unreasonable expectations. In the 1980s, the Gannett Company's dozens of papers had net pretax profit margins of between 20 and 30 percent—a common range for newspapers in that era. "If you take a business class, you will learn pretty quickly that if you can pay the bills and make 10 percent profit, you're a raging success," Kendall said.

As recently as the early 2000s, newspapers could get away with obscene profits because they were regional monopolies. Even now, many newspapers "are just trying to mitigate the stock reduction by a few pennies," Kendall said. "I was heartsick watching people I care about lose their jobs. I started getting the feeling like I've been fooled all these years. Yeah, we did some good work, but really the bean counters always ran the show." And now the workers are paying the price: "The people at the top don't seem to be losing their jobs. But we are."

So Kendall turned his back on his old trade and started making pizzas, a gig that "seems more honorable to me than to be involved with what passes for journalism these days. I used to give free pizzas to any journalist who was laid off. I had to stop because there are so many of them now."

BY NATURE, MANY JOURNALISTS ARE outsiders. The job rewards the thick-skinned and relentless, and those who don't start out as lone-wolf hustlers often end up that way. "There's a perpetual adolescence to being a reporter," explained my colleague Bruce Shapiro, who heads the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma at Columbia University's journalism school. "In daily news, your job is deadline to deadline, day to day. T.S. Eliot calls it the 'ecstasy of the animals.' Living in the eternal present. Reporters live in the eternal present."

This lifestyle often isn't good for any kind of personal



“The people at the top don't seem to be losing their jobs. But we are.”

—Russ Kendall

relationship. The journalist's lot would be an isolated existence save for the fact that a newsroom is a tribe for outsiders.

Maybe that's why so many people I interviewed felt so untethered. The journalist cast out of a newsroom is spun into a lonely orbit. I ran this theory by Shapiro, whose work at the Dart Center helps prepare journalists to cover trauma (and also, journalist friends say, helps them cope with their own in the process).

"I think that being the outsider is part of the mythology," Shapiro said. "And then suddenly it turns out that the tribe doesn't protect you against the economy; it doesn't protect you against the bosses."

For many young journalists, this reality is the only one they've known. Some are coming of age in a freelance universe, where the newsroom is as alien as a Smith Corona. Yet even in web-focused newsrooms full of fresh faces, where "old" means a reporter over 30, they can feel alone. And while many may be up for the challenge at first, they're paying the price in both lost support and lost mentorship, particularly as veteran talent is expelled from the field.

I told a young newspaper journalist in the intermountain West (who asked to remain anonymous) how much seasoned pros had guided me early in my career. "Exactly," he said. "I'm 24, and I feel like I'm already one of the better journalists in the state. I absolutely should not feel that way, but it's because the good older ones are dropping off. What I want more than anything is to be surrounded by people who could take my work and hack it up, show me all the ways it could be better."

IN 2009, BARBARA EHRENREICH GAVE A GRADUATION speech at the University of California at Berkeley's journalism school. "How do you think it feels to be an autoworker right now?" she asked. "And I've spent time with plenty of laid-off paper-mill workers, construction workers and miners.... So let me be the first to say this to you: Welcome to the American working class."

It was dark advice. But the times could at last be shifting. As digital journalism finds its place in the new-media landscape, helped by a crop of new web-only publications, younger journalists are beginning to demand the kind of work protections, decent wages, and newsroom solidarity that many of their older counterparts once enjoyed. In the past year, workers have voted to unionize at Gawker, Vice, Salon, and ThinkProgress, affiliating with the Writers Guild of America East, AFL-CIO. In January, The Huffington Post's management voluntarily recognized the WGAE to represent 262 employees. The union negotiates "compensation, benefits, and job security" for its members.

The NewsGuild represents the digital newsrooms of *The Guardian* US and, until it folded last month, Al Jazeera America. (Since learning of the closing, a group of AJAM reporters have banded together to create a website and help one another find jobs.) People organizing at digital-media outlets are doing so for the same reasons that people did a generation ago, said Gabriel Arana, a former senior media editor at The Huffington Post, who was involved with the union drive. "A lot of these new-media companies feel like tech companies. But at a certain point, having free snacks at work means less than having a retirement account or a decent salary that you can raise a family on. Digital media is maturing. People in it want the stability to be able to make a career out of it."

Still, some younger journalists worry about that distant day when they hit their 50s. "If so many talented career journos are leaving," said the 24-year-old reporter in the intermountain West, "what do young ones like me have to look forward to?" ■

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Letters

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(continued from page 2)

on about the Clintons and their dog-whistle-echo politics. But she misses the point when she complains about "the Democratic Party." We need to realize that there is no such entity. There are only the people who occupy the Democratic Party, especially the people who run for and win office under the Democratic label. The left is sadly short of such people at the congressional, state, and local levels. That needs to change: It's our own fault, and merely complaining about it is useless.

CHRIS NIELSEN
SEATTLE

■ This was a very insightful and well-written piece. I only hope the authors prepare a talking-points version of it and get it in front of Sanders, Clinton, and all other Democrats.

CRAIG REINARMAN

Déjà Vu All Over Again

■ It's confounding that the Obama administration is replicating Reagan-era policies, repeating Elliott Abrams's insistence from 30 years ago that refugees from El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala are "economic migrants" almost verbatim, despite numerous federal-court decisions overturning administration policies ["A US Refugee Crisis," Feb. 29]. Both Sanders and Clinton have declared their intention to end the detention/deportation system and close down private prisons that incarcerate migrants for profit. But it will take strong citizen pressure to ensure that they fulfill their promises.

LINDA RABEN

Socialism for Socialists

■ At 74, like Bernie, this once-Republican refugee from suburbia has been waiting a long time to see a serious definition of socialism

applied to good and practical reforms happening in America besides "progressive taxation" and "transfer payments" ["Practically Socialism," Feb. 29]. By the way, like many municipal hotbeds of socialism, Brooklyn still owns its Borough Hall and Green Bay still owns its Packers. Thanks to my fellow historian Gar Alperovitz. W. R. EVERDELL

Don't Ignore Foreign Policy

I was surprised and dismayed that the otherwise enlightening articles on Hillary Clinton by Suzanna Danuta Walters and Liza Featherstone ["Why This Socialist Feminist Is Voting for Hillary" and "Why This Socialist Feminist Is Not Voting for Hillary," Jan. 25/ Feb. 1] made no mention of foreign policy. The United States has been at war almost continuously since the Korean War. Our war in Afghanistan is seemingly endless and makes no more sense today than it did nearly 15 years ago. Relations with Russia are just short of a deep freeze. President Obama has resisted Republican demands for even greater US military involvement in Syria, but those demands will continue to grow. Clinton supported the overthrow of Moammar El-Gadhafi, which left Libya in chaos and opened its arsenals to ISIS. She favors aiding the anti-government rebels in Syria and is a steadfast supporter of Israel despite its treatment of the Palestinians. Since the Republican candidates are frightening, I will vote for Clinton, but meanwhile I wish the left would put more pressure on her to adopt a foreign policy that emphasizes peaceful solutions rather than military confrontation when dealing with the world's conflicts.

RACHELLE MARSHALL
MILL VALLEY, CALIF.

Books & the Arts.



URSULA LINDSEY

A barrier near Tahrir Square in Cairo, March 15, 2012.

Unreal City

by URSULA LINDSEY

One evening last December, I strolled through the busy streets of the Cairo neighborhood known as Downtown to the new offices of the independent publishing house Merit. Just around the corner from the Café Riche, where young revolutionaries secretly printed pamphlets promoting the 1919 uprising against the British, and where the novelist Naguib Mahfouz held court in the 1960s, I turned onto Mohamed Sabri Abu Alam Street. Between the Armenian church and the Ministry of Religious Endowments, a striking neo-Islamic structure completed in 1929, I walked into a

grand old apartment building that had seen better days.

I found several hundred young Egyptians spilling out of a renovated flat and down the building's curved marble staircase. Inside the apartment, there were paintings on the walls, tables covered with Merit's brightly designed, inexpensive paperbacks, and an atmosphere of joyful pandemonium. Vain attempts were being made to squeeze a few more chairs into the space. Greetings and exhortations filled the air. Mohamed Hashim, Merit's publisher, lurked in the background in a straw hat, refusing to give a speech. But several authors spoke up, praising Merit for being "a model of freedom," for "pushing the boundaries" and creating "a feeling of

community in these very bad times," and for being a place where one could still talk of "our oppressed revolution that...isn't over."

Merit's old office had been at the end of Kasr al-Nil Street, just a stone's throw from Tahrir Square. In January and February 2011, it served as a crowded, informal base camp for protesters during the 18 days it took to depose President Hosni Mubarak. Long before that momentous time, I had gotten into the habit of dropping by Merit. In the late afternoon, I'd join the company of friends and writers sitting on ragged couches in the office's cramped quarters and bantering with Hashim, his voice hoarse from years of smoking and his thin face often creased by an impish smile. There was never any talk of business, and I often won-

Ursula Lindsey is a writer based in the Middle East. She manages the website The Arabist.

dered how this ridiculously casual operation continued to publish books by some of Egypt's most promising new talents.

Cairo has always had a lively literary scene, which since the early 20th century has been anchored in the bars, bookstores, offices, and smoke-filled cafés of Downtown. The district adjoins Tahrir Square, a belle époque wonder created by Khedive Ismail Pasha in 1865 to rival the glory of Paris. Its elegant apartment buildings, old palaces, and passages have slipped into charming dilapidation, but it remains the city's cultural epicenter. In the novel *The Yacoubian Building*, a best seller during Mubarak's twilight years in power, Alaa Al Aswany indicts the regime's corruption and describes its repercussions on the lives of the residents of a historic Downtown building. Merit published the first edition.

Two years after Mubarak's downfall, Hashim and his friends were in the street again. In 2013, they backed the protests against the Muslim Brotherhood's post-Mubarak government and the military intervention that ousted Mohamed Morsi from the presidency that July. Headed by Gen. Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, who has since become president, the regime outlawed the Brotherhood and arrested thousands of its members. When security forces cleared Morsi supporters from Rabaa al-Adawiya Square in August 2013, they left at least 1,000 people dead.

As an Islamist insurgency grew in the Sinai Peninsula and the country's economy faltered, the Sisi regime's repression expanded in every direction, driving a generation of young activists into prison, exile, or silence. Egyptians are still dying regularly in police custody or being kidnapped and held for weeks or months on end in a secret, parallel prison system where torture is rampant. The authorities harass media outlets, human-rights groups, universities, civil-society organizations, and cultural institutions—anywhere citizens might congregate, reflect, and express themselves.

In the entrance to Merit's office hangs a tattered, framed gray sheet of paper covered in signatures. At the top is written I WAS IN TAHRIR. So many waves of violence, fatigue, disappointment, and confusion have swept over Egypt since the uprising five years ago that these days, one almost forgets, or doubts, it ever took place. Sisi's regime wants not only to rewrite the past—it insists the Arab Spring was a conspiracy hatched by the West and Islamists—but also to forbid any honest accounting of the present crisis and to disable the capacity to imagine alternatives. To the government, the motley spirit of defiance displayed by institutions like Merit is unacceptable.

Not long after moving into its new Downtown offices, Merit was raided by the authorities. The official reason was the lack of a valid publishing license. But a young volunteer was taken into custody and questioned about the content of Merit's books and seminars and of Hashim's own political views. It was another heavy blow to Cairo's beleaguered cultural milieu. Egyptian writers have always faced small readerships, scant pay, and occasional censorship. Today, though, the situation is at its worst.

When I spoke to him in February, the novelist Ahmed Naji said that, like many other writers and artists, he was "looking for any opportunity to get out of here." He added: "What can you do in Egypt, as a young man or a writer or a human being?" At the time, Naji was on trial for obscenity and offending public morals. The charges stemmed from a literary magazine's publication in August 2014 of a chapter from his latest novel *Istikhdam al-Hayat*, or "The Use of Life" (an English translation by Ben Koerber is forthcoming from University of Texas Press). The magazine is the historic, state-owned *Akhbar al-Adab* (Literary News), where Naji is a writer and editor. The charges carry a sentence of up to two years in jail. Naji was acquitted at a trial in January, but the prosecutor appealed and the case was moved to a higher court for retrial.

In December, I had met Naji at Estoril, a restaurant popular with Downtown bohemians, where the aged waiters wear their anachronistic turbans with practiced nonchalance. Naji is a baby-faced 30-year-old; his horseshoe mustache only seems to accentuate his youth. At age 16, he fled the provincial Egyptian city of Mansoura and a conservative family that expected him to become a doctor. He studied journalism at Akhbar al-Yaum Academy and began working at *Akhbar al-Adab*.

Naji's novel is a surreal tale of Cairo's future obliteration and features illustrations by the cartoonist Ayman al-Zurqani. The narrator, speaking from the future, reminisces about the impossible city he lived in as a young man. In the chapter that landed Naji in court, the narrator recounts staying up all night smoking hashish and drinking with his friends; the next day, he meets his lover for brunch and mid-afternoon sex. Then two female friends pick him up and they drive through streets empty of the usual traffic, to drink a beer at sunset on cliffs overlooking the city:

Mona's wearing a long skirt of some light fabric. I stick my head between the seats and see she's bunched up her

skirt in her lap and is rolling a joint. I'm distracted by the glow of her knees, and Samira's turning up the music. Jimi Hendrix's guitar shrieks like a hen laying its first egg. I open the window as we pass over the Azhar Bridge, and imagine I catch a whiff of cumin, pepper and spices. As we exit the bridge and enter the Husayn district, I smell some burnt coffee beans that, without being an expert, I can tell are of poor quality. The scent fills my nostrils. Among the tombs in the City of the Dead, the smell of liver fried in battery acid lingers like a rain cloud.

In describing the sex scene between the narrator and his lover, Naji uses the Arabic words for "cock" and "pussy." In August of 2015, a middle-aged man from Cairo's Bulaq neighborhood filed a claim against Naji. In his complaint, Hany Salah Tawfiq spun a lively tale himself, one designed to appeal to the most paternalistic and moralistic impulses of Egypt's judicial system. He claimed that reading the story after his indignant wife pointed it out to him, and before his innocent daughters could be exposed to it, caused him such consternation that "his heartbeat fluctuated and his blood pressure dropped." The prosecutor who took the case to trial that November seemed to treat the novel as a factual description of Naji's own immoral behavior. To restrained titters from the author's friends in the audience, the prosecutor delivered a long indictment tinged with religious rhetoric and mixed metaphors on the poisonous effect of such filth.

The prosecutor spoke entirely in *fusha*. Traditionally, there has been a divide between *fusha*—formal Arabic—and *amiya*, colloquial Arabic. Although they're derived from the same sources, the first is closer to the Arabic of the Koran; different forms of it are used in religious and official discourse, the media, and literature. Naguib Mahfouz, Egypt's 1988 Nobel laureate, wrote his dialogues in *fusha* even though *amiya* is what everyone actually speaks. Ahmed Naji is part of a generation of younger Egyptian writers whose work increasingly includes dialect, allusions to pop culture, profanity, and the funny neologisms created by the Arabicization of foreign words. The spread of this new, young, colloquial, "vulgar" Arabic is a democratic phenomenon linked, in part, to the online world, where people tend to write as they speak. Using slang is a way to puncture the disingenuousness of official discourse. The use of profanity can also be deeply political. For many of the online activists writing in the years before Mubarak fell,



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YOUR HOSTS

Peter Kornbluh



The longtime Cuba correspondent for *The Nation*, Peter Kornbluh, is Cuba analyst at the National Security Archive in Washington, DC. He is the author of *Bay of Pigs Declassified*, co-author of *The Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962*, and co-author of the recently published *Back Channel to Cuba: The Hidden History of Negotiations Between Washington and Cuba*, chosen by *Foreign Affairs* as Best Book of the Year.

Charles Bittner



For almost two decades, Charles Bittner has served as *The Nation's* academic liaison. He's hosted five previous *Nation* trips to Cuba and teaches in the sociology department at St. John's University.

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it was a purposeful choice to insult his regime in the foulest terms possible—to deny figures of authority the linguistic deference that, no matter how unpopular they may be, they expect to be shown in public forums.

Naji argues that the terms he uses for the male and female anatomy not only can be heard on every street corner in Cairo, but also appear in classical Arabic literature. It was only in the 19th century, he says, that “middle-class Egyptian intellectuals,” fresh from visits to Victorian England, popularized the euphemisms that became common in literature. Nasser Amin, Naji’s lawyer, argued the point in his trial, presenting the judge with books of classical Arabic literature and Islamic exegesis containing the vulgar terms in question.

The head of the Egyptian writers’ union testified in Naji’s defense. So did Sonallah Ibrahim, whose novel *That Smell*—the story of a recently released political prisoner trying to adapt to life on the outside, and finding the Egypt of the 1960s a larger prison—was censored 50 years ago largely due to a matter-of-fact masturbation scene. Ibrahim is one of the country’s most original literary talents, instantly recognizable from his mop of frizzy gray hair and his thick-rimmed black spectacles. He was visibly angered when the prosecutor challenged the defense witnesses to read the offending chapter in question out loud in court. They answered that a literary text should not be read in court, out of context. But the prosecutor had scored a point; many Egyptians would agree that the passage in question was shockingly offensive, not art.

Freedom of expression is enshrined in the Egyptian Constitution and vouchsafed by the president in interviews with foreign media. But the rule of law is in tatters, and in daily life the principle of free speech has been hemmed in by a thicket of qualifications and conditions. Of Naji’s case, the novelist Youssef Rakha says: “I don’t think it actually is an issue of freedom of expression. It’s a deeper issue of society’s view of itself and its duplicity.” Artists are under threat in Egypt, he adds, “not because of laws but attitudes and assumptions and general zeitgeist.”

Rakha, who is 39, writes ambitious, dark experimental novels whose uneven surfaces glint with sharp aphorisms and passages of lyrical beauty. *The Crocodiles* (translated into English by Robin Moger for Seven Stories Press) is about a group of poets and artists navigating relationships and ambitions, from the late 1990s through the uprising; it also features several graphic sex scenes. Writers take

risks, Rakha says, in part because they are protected by the modest size of their readership. “As writers, we’ve operated on the assumption it’s unlikely your novel will spread beyond a circle,” he says, “and as long as it doesn’t, you’re safe.” Particularly today, “if you’re going to make art about Egypt, how are you going to be polite?” he adds. “It’s almost like denying reality as opposed to dealing with it.”

Rakha’s question reminded me of something I had seen a little over five years ago, on the morning of January 29, 2011: a man in Tahrir Square screaming in protest against Mubarak with such ferocity that the veins in his neck bulged and he gasped for air. The ground was sparkling with shattered glass, and behind him smoke was still rising from the headquarters of Mubarak’s ruling party. Bystanders gently tried to calm the man down, not because they objected to his anger but because they seemed concerned for his health.

What I remember most clearly about that time in the capital is the overflowing talk. Cairo has always been a garrulous city, but in the days and weeks and months that followed Mubarak’s ouster, the chatter was suddenly urgent. People questioned and argued and shouted. Every other day there was a demonstration on a street corner, with students or employees chanting their demands. Every errand and every taxi ride turned into a political conversation. Every night, the TV talk shows crackled with electrifying exchanges. Graffiti, outdoor cinemas and concerts, art festivals in the street—all exploded with talk. People said that, no matter what happened, the walls of fear would never rise again.

Nowadays, TV talk shows offer stultifying three-hour-long harangues on the threats that Egypt faces, delivered by a cast of agitated sycophants whose purpose seems to be to suck up all the air in which any genuine thought might live. Downtown has been cleaned up, the graffiti painted over, and many of the street-side cafés favored by young people have closed. The shouting has stopped. People lower their voices to talk politics in public, if they talk about them at all.

For several years, Alaa Al Aswany hosted a monthly seminar. It had evolved from a small salon that started late in the Mubarak era into standing-room-only events, where the novelist discussed current affairs with other cultural and political celebrities. In December, security officials shut it down. Aswany had already been barred from writing his weekly column in the newspaper *Al-Masry al-Youm* and from appearing on state TV. “Freedom of expression does not exist, the situation is worse than under

Mubarak,” he told *The Guardian* that month.

Aswany was stating the obvious, something he has a gift for. He is a large man with a warm, booming voice who writes fast-moving, confidently plotted novels, and whose every pronouncement has a natural forcefulness. He was already famous in 2011, but thereafter he became one of the country’s preeminent public commentators and one of the uprising’s most eloquent advocates. In a memorable TV exchange that year, he gave a tongue-lashing to Prime Minister Ahmed Shafik, previously Mubarak’s minister for civil aviation, for his complicity with the old regime. Shafik was forced to resign the next day.

Back then, the catchphrase of Al Aswany’s popular newspaper column was “Democracy is the solution,” a rebuke to the Muslim Brotherhood’s motto “Islam is the solution.” Like the overwhelming majority of the country’s writers, artists, and intellectuals, Al Aswany supported the army’s ouster of Islamist president Mohamed Morsi in the summer of 2013 and defended the killing of hundreds of his supporters. “We are in a state of war,” he said at the time. The Muslim Brothers “are not the peaceful, democratic force that they said they were for 40 years. They are a group of terrorists and fascists.”

The sentiment was widespread. In the fall of 2013, a few months after the massacre of Brotherhood supporters at Rabaa el-Adawiya Square, I visited Sonallah Ibrahim in his home. I was shocked when this gentle man, a lifelong dissident who was jailed by Gamal Abdel Nasser from 1959 to 1964, defended the police’s actions. “The fundamental thing now is, if the police officer who used to insult me and kick me and beat me under Mubarak, if now he is fighting against terrorism, I am with him,” Ibrahim told me. Like many leftists of his generation, he views a strong state that can act as a bulwark against foreign imperialism and Islamism as more important than the rights of individual citizens.

Ibrahim and the rest of Egypt’s literati had reason to loathe and fear the Brotherhood. For years, Islamists have attacked artists—in the courts, on the airwaves, and in the streets—for producing art that they considered to be blasphemous or immoral. In 1994, Naguib Mahfouz barely survived being assaulted by a young zealot who had been told Mahfouz’s novel *The Children of the Alley*, which features allegorical portraits of the prophets, including Muhammad, was sacrilegious. Islamists have assailed sculptures and inveighed against ballet; they often led campaigns to ban books they considered offensive, including a version of *The Thousand and One Nights*

that was published by a state-owned press.

The fears of Egypt's cultural elite were confirmed in 2012, when the Brotherhood won the parliamentary majority and presidency, and Islamists tried to monopolize power within public institutions. As the Brotherhood encountered opposition, it became increasingly strident and paranoid. It betrayed its secular allies to pursue a divisive sectarian agenda, enshrining sharia in the Constitution. When a Brotherhood appointee became the head of the Ministry of Culture and tried to bring the institution into line, firing several key figures, artists staged an open-ended sit-in at its offices. If the Brotherhood had remained in power, Youssef Rakha believes, "it would have been a hundred times worse. The conflict could have been a real conflict. Political Islam is a civil-war project."

Egypt has paid an extremely high price for the removal of the Brotherhood from power: the scuttling of a democratic experiment, the return of the military to the political forefront, and an ongoing crackdown under Sisi that is the worst the country has witnessed in decades. All of this makes it almost necessary for Egypt's writers and intellectuals to believe that the Islamist group posed an existential threat.

Yet it's an ironic, incontrovertible fact that during the Muslim Brotherhood's brief time in power, free speech flourished in Egypt. The Islamists, try as they might, couldn't stamp out criticism and mockery. They were eager but ineffective censors, unable to contain the many forces allied against them: the security apparatus and the army; the businessmen who own Egypt's private media; the artists and activists who didn't trust them.

Bassem Youssef, who hosted a comedy show inspired by Jon Stewart's that became a national phenomenon, relentlessly ridiculed the Brotherhood and Morsi personally. When Youssef was sued for insulting the president and Islam, his predicament garnered international media attention and was decried by the US State Department. But after the army toppled Morsi, the comedian canceled his show under increasing political pressure and left the country.

Sisi's "secular" military regime has quashed dissent much more ruthlessly than the Brotherhood could have ever dreamed of, in the name of defending public order and public morality. Sisi views culture as little more than propaganda, and journalism that diverges from the state-sanctioned narrative as treason. Cases of individuals being detained for "denigrating religion"—such as three Christian teenagers recently sentenced to five years in prison for producing a video

poking fun at ISIS—continue apace. But the repression today is more unpredictable, indiscriminate, and perverse. A researcher who criticized the army's military campaign in the Sinai was questioned at the airport on his return to Egypt and then deported. A law was passed prohibiting journalists from reporting facts that contradict army statements. A Facebook user who photoshopped Mickey Mouse ears onto a picture of Sisi was convicted of "trying to overthrow the regime" and sentenced to three years in prison. In November, the owner of one of Egypt's top private newspapers was arrested in the most public and humiliating manner possible: His house was raided in the early hours of the morning. The rumor at Cairo dinner parties is that only days before, the man had made the mistake of saying that Sisi might not last more than another six months in the presidency.

When I was in Cairo, it seemed that in the circles I traveled in, bad news came on a daily if not hourly basis. The indomitable Egyptian wit kept up with it, but just barely. A friend of a friend wrote on Facebook: "Remember the good old days, when we were staring into the abyss?"

Sonallah Ibrahim and others blame the Muslim Brotherhood for all that has gone awry, but by throwing their lot in with the army, they have become accomplices in their own misfortune. Their belief that the outcome of the last five years was inevitable can shade into cynicism or hopelessness.

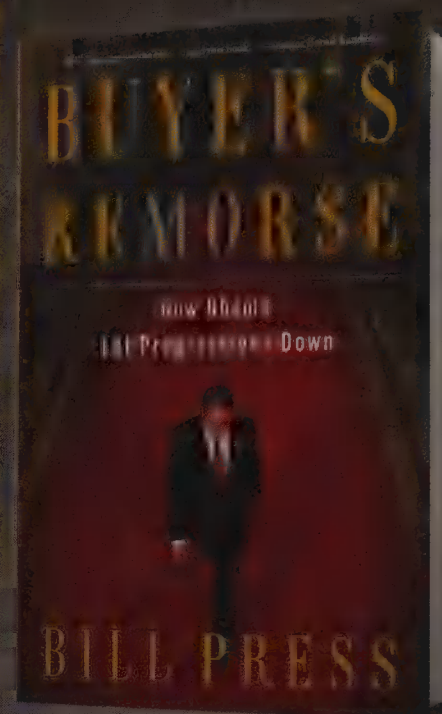
I witnessed both these reactions in conversations with writers about how the country had reached its current low point. On one afternoon in Cairo, I had tea with two Merit authors, Hamdi Abu Golayyel and Ahmed Sabry Aboul-Fotouh. Golayyel has written novels about his Bedouin background and his experience as a construction worker. Aboul-Fotouh has written a widely praised novel about the uprising, centered on the hired thugs who often assaulted demonstrators. Inhaling with gusto on a *shisha* pipe, Aboul-Fotouh dismissed the young activists whom he believed were funded and trained abroad, and said the Muslim Brotherhood had "kidnapped" the revolution from the start: "We screamed for the army to intervene."

"It was a revolution against the army, too," put in Golayyel. "If not for the Brotherhood, we would have held them accountable."

"We would never have held them accountable," said Aboul-Fotouh, waving the idea away with his hand.

Youssef Rakha grew disillusioned with the uprising, as Islamist parties reaped the benefits of a more open political field, while young demonstrators engaged in bloody and

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The prominent liberal syndicated radio and television host Bill Press concisely explains the many ways President Obama has failed to live up to either his promises or his progressive potential, leaving Democrats disillusioned on some of the issues that matter most.

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seemingly pointless clashes with the army and police. Rakha, who is nearly 40, says he grieves for Egypt's younger generation, which "has been fucked over in the most comprehensive way." He explains: "My role as an intellectual is to fight for and perpetrate what I believe in." But having weighed the alternatives, he adds, "tell me—what could I wish for other than what we have now?"

Yet the Egyptian authorities, despite their grip on the political arena and their widespread regional and international support, remain unsettled by the events of five years ago and the specter of mass mobilization. No level of control satisfies them. In the lead-up to the uprising's fifth anniversary in January, police inspected thousands of Downtown apartments; they were particularly interested in young people, forcing many of them to share their social-media accounts. The police have also targeted cultural venues where young Egyptians frequently meet. An art and photography center was raided in November and closed after unlicensed software was found on some computers. At the end of December, police from the arts-censorship bureau raided Townhouse, a beloved gallery and bookstore that has played a crucial role in the development of Cairo's arts scene, and confiscated books, notebooks, CDs, flash drives, the gallery's main desktop computer, and a staff member's personal laptop. Police questioned employees for several hours but didn't say what they were investigating. The gallery was sealed; the reason given was a lack of adequate fire exits.

It was the following night that the police raided Merit's new offices. At the time, Mohamed Hashim refused to close shop. But when I visited him again at the end of January, he was despondent. The previous day, he had received a tax bill for over 2 million Egyptian pounds (about \$260,000). He sat at his desk in the near-empty office holding the crumpled piece of paper. "This is long-term revenge," he said. "We were with the revolution. We were against the Brothers and the army.... They are pressuring me to leave the country or close or go to jail. They want to close down the public domain."

"This is the new Downtown," Ahmed Naji wrote in an article published on the website Huna Sotak on January 7. It's "an open air museum for ghosts"—

life has ebbed out of the heart of Cairo, the city they say never sleeps. To the mind of the Egyptian security state, this is the greatest success. Nothing troubles the serenity of their imaginary safety, not demonstrations nor gather-

ings for a literary salon or an art exhibition.... The problem has become, not that the regime pursues its opponents but that it hunts down all signs of life; culture and art are forbidden.

Naji himself has become the latest victim of the ongoing criminalization of youth, creativity, and outspokenness. To everyone's shock, at the conclusion of his retrial on February 20, he received the full two-year sentence. It is a harsh and unprecedented verdict against a novelist in Egypt. Naji was taken straight into custody.

During my time in Cairo, a popular young cartoonist, Islam Gawish, whose Facebook page has nearly 2 million followers, was detained by state security—possibly for political satire, possibly for operating a Facebook page without a license, something that until then no one had known was a crime. Two nights later, young soccer fans rioted over the lack of prosecutions in a bloody stadium clash a few years ago. President Sisi called in to a TV talk show and delivered a rambling speech on his favorite topic: the dangers that face Egypt and his efforts to save the country.

The president is always soft-spoken, his voice inflected with saccharine, faux-humble tones. He claimed, "I'm not upset at Gawish or anyone.... No one can speak on my behalf and say that I get upset from criticism." He went on to take responsibility for the government's failure to reach Egypt's angry young people, saying, "It's us who are unable to communicate with" them. (In April 2014, he had said rather clearly that "Egypt's youth should not be thinking about when they will 'live.'") Half of all Egyptians are 25 or younger. Sisi spoke without interruption for half an hour, sounding like a put-upon dad, but I got the

distinct impression that he isn't really interested in what the kids have to say. He thinks the problem is that they won't listen.

It could be they have other things on their minds. Naji's view of Cairo in *Istikhdam al-Hayat* is caustic but true to life. He dwells on the traffic, the crowding, the aggression and hypocrisy, the sexual frustration of men, and the endless harassment of women. His narrator says: "Wherever you live or go in Cairo, you're constantly under assault. Fate's got you by the balls. All the combined forces on earth cannot change this fate. You may be fucked over at any moment, from above or below, left or right." The city's destruction in the novel—it is submerged by an epic, man-made sandstorm—speaks to the desire for radical change that I have heard expressed more than once in Egypt in apocalyptic terms. People dream of starting over without rulers, and then try to revolt. Rulers dream of starting over without the people: Last year, Sisi's government unveiled a wildly unrealistic plan for a "New Cairo," a satellite city with skyscrapers and its own airport and amusement park, to be built in the desert far from the existing capital's density and disorder.

Yet there are glimpses in *Istikhdam al-Hayat* of a redeeming tenderness. For Naji, the very chapter that has landed him in prison is "an attempt to describe what a happy day would look like for a young man in Cairo." While most of the novel depicts life in the city as both restless and oppressive, the chapter is a brief moment of freedom and ease, and a celebration of camaraderie. As the narrator says, "In exchange for everything it does to its residents, Cairo grants only irrevocable friendships, contracted not by free choice but according to the necessities of fate. The saying goes, 'Go to Cairo and you will find those like you.'" That may be what Egypt's rulers fear the most. ■

A Sense of Place

by VIVIAN GORNICK

It is something of a literary convention that the life of the Famous Writer is carefully documented, while the lives of those around her or him—husbands, wives, friends, lovers—routinely fall into the paperless oblivion reserved for what Diane Johnson so memorably called "lesser lives." Yet "a lesser life," as Johnson poignantly

stressed, "does not seem lesser to the person who leads one."

Constance Fenimore Woolson was a popular American writer of the late 19th century whose friendship with Henry James has, among James scholars, long qualified hers as a distinctly lesser life. In all the James biographies, Woolson appears as a shadowy presence whose morbid anxieties simply echo those of the Master himself. Now, with the publication of a full-length biography

Vivian Gornick's most recent book is The Odd Woman and the City.

and the reissue of a collection of her stories, Woolson emerges as a figure of some dimension in her own right.

She was born in a New Hampshire village in 1840, to a spirited woman who was also the niece of James Fenimore Cooper, and an equally spirited man of charm and literary intelligence who couldn't make a go of any of the occupations he pursued. These people wanted to be happy, but filial tragedy dogged them. Within a month of Constance's birth, three of the five sisters who preceded her died of scarlet fever; the other two would die some years later of tuberculosis. After Constance came three more babies, only two of whom lived. All in all, Hannah and Jarvis Woolson buried six of their nine children, and the ones who survived remained infected with a brooding depressiveness that haunted them all their lives.

Shortly after the three little girls died, the Woolsons pulled up stakes and moved, first to upstate New York, then to Cleveland, and, after the father died, down to St. Augustine, Florida. "When tragedy struck," Anne Rioux tells us in *Constance Fenimore Woolson: Portrait of a Lady Novelist*, "the Woolsons moved on." For Jarvis, "new scenery was a powerful tonic." This response to loss and grief, Rioux says, "became ingrained in their children, most of all Constance, who would spend the majority of her adult life on the move."

Although she had been writing since childhood, Woolson didn't try to publish until she was nearly 30 years old. Her work met with immediate success. Very soon—and for decades to come—her stories, essays, and sketches were appearing in the major magazines of the time: *Harper's*, *Scribner's*, *The Atlantic Monthly*. Unlike other women writers of her generation who, for the most part, were concentrating on tales of love and marriage, Woolson wrote out of a strong sense of place. Bret Harte, the great storyteller of the West, had been one of her earliest influences; because of him, she thought it fine to set her own stories in the world of the Great Lakes, specifically on the islands and marshlands and logging camps in and around Lake Huron, where the Woolson family had regularly visited when they lived in Ohio. Woolson was enchanted by the protean beauty everywhere to hand, as well as by the many eccentric people who dwelled in the local wilderness areas that she, from earliest youth, had loved exploring.

Such was Woolson's talent that not long after she started publishing, her work was being described as an introduction to a "region as fresh and new as any that American literature has touched." But very quickly,

Books Discussed in This Essay

Constance Fenimore Woolson

Portrait of a Lady Novelist.

By Anne Boyd Rioux.

Norton. 416 pp. \$32.95.

Miss Grief and Other Stories

By Constance Fenimore Woolson.

Edited by Anne Boyd Rioux.

Norton. 320 pp. Paper \$15.95.

through an ever-deepening ability to interpret her characters' situations emotionally as well as geographically, Woolson was also seen to be joining that school of writers—headed by William Dean Howells—whose work was developing the distinctive brand of realism that prevailed in American literature throughout the latter half of the 19th century. Empathetic realism was the name of the game, and for a good 20 years, between the 1870s and the 1890s, Constance Woolson was considered one of the best at it.

As a writer, she was an American realist of a high order; at the same time, she was a woman without a permanent home who suffered from serious bouts of depression, the misery of early-onset deafness, and the psychological inability to make a romantic connection. All this she experienced as a humiliation against which she had begun defending herself while still young; by the time she came of age, her armor of defensive reserve was in place.

On this score, Woolson suffered doubly. Not only did her reserve separate her from emotional expressiveness; it was also often taken for a constitutional lack of warmth. Her situation was distressing, but distress gave her understanding, and understanding gave her insight. In *Anne*, her first novel, Woolson's title character is an otherwise delightful girl whose psychological makeup is marred by a "tinge of coldness." This coldness, the omniscient narrator observes, originates in Anne's inability to feel warmly toward herself, and therefore toward others. "For warm-heartedness," the reader is instructed, "generally begins at home, and those who are warm to others are warmer to themselves; it is but the overflow." In her maturity, Woolson's "coldness" added immeasurably to all the reasons she had for feeling ever more isolated as the years went on.

In 1879, with both of her parents now dead and she herself economically independent, Woolson was free to do what every well-off American of her generation felt compelled to do: undertake the adventure of European travel. Once abroad,

her connections were sufficient to put her in touch with the circle of Anglo-Americans to which Henry James belonged, and in 1880 the two met in Florence. James despised the women "scribblers" of his day—especially the ones who were more successful at magazine publication than he—but he met with her when Woolson presented herself with a letter of introduction from a relative of his in the States. To his great surprise, he saw quickly that she was a woman of taste and judgment whose self-divisions mirrored his own.

Thus began a friendship between a pair of writers of unequal talent and status who nonetheless experienced a degree of equality in conversation that made them seek out each other's company with irregular regularity for the next 14 years. In France, England, or Italy, Henry and Constance walked and talked; took tea and talked; went to museums and talked. They talked books, they talked writing, they talked the moral imagination. As both feared impropriety more than death itself, the exchange was not personal in any usual sense; but the intellectual honesty that animated their conversation made each of them feel less alone in the world.

Except for the times when it did not.

In a Woolson story called "At the Château of Corinne," a group of Americans make up a house party at a villa on a lake near Geneva. Among them is a woman who has written a much-admired poem that receives a brutal critique from one of the other guests when he learns that she is the poem's author. "Its rhythm," he tells her, is "crude and unmelodious, its coloring was exaggerated," its thesis unpersuasive. But, he adds, all this was to be predicted because "we do not expect great poems from women any more than we expect great pictures; we do not expect strong logic any more than we expect brawny muscle." A woman's mind, quite simply, was not the same as that of a man's—it could not accommodate creative genius—and to see a woman leave her own mental sphere and try to enter that of a man's was painful if not pathetic.

Woolson was writing in an age when the idea of first-rate talent in a woman made civilized men sputter. Henry James, unlike Nathaniel Hawthorne, did not say that women should be whipped before they were allowed to publish, but he shared the prejudice. Woolson's work had often been cited by critics for its power and originality, but power and originality did not carry much weight with James, for whom fineness of writing and depth of artistic purpose were all. Every now and then, a pursed lip here, an injudicious silence there—and Woolson knew that he did

not put a high value on her work. Nor, she felt, did anyone around him. In America, she suspected that the literary elite would always exclude her; in Europe, the conviction sank into her soul.

In this regard, Woolson's friendship with James was as problematic as her 15-year wander in Europe; together, they fed rather than dispelled the gnawing insecurity that was her near-constant companion. But a paralysis of the will set in that kept her moving about the continent until depression of a clinical order took hold and—as depression deprives one of sense as well as sensibility—in January 1894, she ended her life by jumping from the window of an upper-story apartment in a palace facing the Grand Canal in Venice. She was 53 years old.

Anne Rioux's book is a serviceable biography that tracks Woolson's movements—names, dates, relations, places of travel—from birth to death. It also tells us many things about her. For instance, we learn that 16 years after her father's death, she still felt desolate; after the Civil War, she thought “the feeling of having truly lived was no more”; and St. Augustine was a place that “would excite [her] imagination for many winters to come.” We are told these things but, unfortunately, we do not feel their import, because Woolson herself does not come alive in the pages of this book. Although Rioux indicates clearly enough that Woolson was not in the market for a conventional marriage, perhaps not in the market for marriage at all, the puzzle of why Woolson could not free herself from the psychological knots within which she was bound is never explored, much less solved. What is missing is a point of view informed by the kind of insight that illuminates the subject's inner life.

Nor, sorry to say, does Rioux offer anything in the way of satisfactory criticism of Woolson's work. Consider the following on a story published in 1875: “The thirty-four-year-old author put much of her earlier uncertainty and hopelessness into her characterization of Sara, a magazine writer in her late twenties...[who] is unusually sensitive, caustic, and isolated, we learn, because of a broken engagement.” Not once in Rioux's book does the reader feel persuaded that the failure of a love affair had become a useful metaphor for Woolson.

After coming to know—or not know—Woolson through this biography and those of Henry James, turning to her *Miss Grief and Other Stories* is something of a shock; that's how unexpected is the punch that much of the book delivers. There are seven stories in

all, three set in Europe, four in America. The writing in all of them is remarkably good, but it is the American stories that will send the reader looking for more of Woolson's work. Those set in Europe have invariably to do with the fate of the failed artist or the emotional artifice of Americans abroad, and are marred by an oddly blurred sense of artistic purpose. But the ones set among eccentrics living in the rural or backwood areas of the Great Lakes or on the Southern coast (almost all published in the 1870s) are told with an authentic directness that carries the tale straight home. The voice in these stories is as clear and fresh as the sound of a bell riding the early morning air in a place of natural wonder. The delight it takes in its surround is transparent; the irony it displays toward the women and men it meets with is lighthearted; the moral it draws from the situation in which the story rests evokes the sheer gladness, if not the awe, of earthly existence.

One of the best of these stories is “St. Clair Flats.” The Flats are a vast wetland composed of islands, marshes, and bays at the mouth of the river in Michigan that connects Lake Huron with Lake St. Clair. They are home to a huge variety of waterfowl, migrating birds, deer, and a mass of aquatic life; the area regularly draws hunters and fishermen and others who wish to experience something of the wild. To this day, passenger steamers ply these waters with tourists bound for one or another of the lakes.

Woolson's story is told by one of two young men, educated urbanites who, standing on the deck of the steamer as it makes its tortured way through waters choked with reeds, water lilies, and grasses of all kinds, are enthralled by the scene before them.

“The word ‘marsh’ does not bring up a beautiful picture to the mind,” the narrator begins,

and yet the reality was as beautiful as anything I have ever seen—an enchanted land, whose memory haunts me as an idea unwritten, a melody unsung, a picture unpainted, haunts the artist, and will not away. On each side and in front, as far as the eye could reach, stretched the low green land which was yet no land, intersected by hundreds of channels narrow and broad, whose waters were green as their shores.... You might call it a marsh; but there was no mud, no dark slimy water, no stagnant scum; there were no rank yellow lilies, no gormandizing frogs, no swinish mud-turtles. The clear waters of the channels ran over golden sands

and...only in a bay, or where protected by a crescent point, could the fair white lilies float in the quiet their serene beauty requires.

“What a wild place it is!” cries Raymond, the narrator's companion. “How boundless it looks.... I have seen the ocean, I have seen the prairies, I have seen the great desert, but this is like a mixture of the three. It is an ocean full of land,—a prairie full of water,—a desert full of verdure.”

At the time in which Woolson's story is set—1855—almost no one ever got off the steamer anywhere in the Flats. But somewhere in the middle of the trip between the lakes, these two men, bent on adventure, launch themselves from the steamer in a rowboat, and here the story begins.

Convinced that there is a place and a set of persons who will provide them with bed and board while they spend a few days exploring the marsh—eager as they are to “penetrate far within its green fastnesses”—our two city slickers row out to a lighthouse where the keeper's wife tells them to try Waiting Samuel's.

Who, pray tell, is Waiting Samuel? He's the local religious madman, who lives just up the channel on one of the few small islands in the marsh. And what is he waiting for? The Day of Judgment.

When our travelers finally reach solid ground and knock on the door of the small house, a voice within calls out: “Who are you, and what do you want with Waiting Samuel?” Then comes the following exchange:

“Pilgrims, asking for food and shelter,” replies Raymond.

“Do you know the ways of righteousness?”

“We can learn them.”

“Will you give me the charge of your souls?”

“Certainly, if you will also take charge of our bodies.”

“Supper, for instance...and beds,” I said.

Waiting Samuel sees visions: That's who he is and that's what he does. He and Roxana, his bedraggled wife, have spent their married life wandering ever closer to the setting sun because Samuel's visions have repeatedly instructed them to do so; but now they have come to rest in the Flats, where Samuel spends his days and nights praying and consulting with the spirits, while Roxana does all the work: cooks, cleans, fishes, tends a few cows, makes and sells butter and the fish

she catches, and regularly rows to town for supplies. Samuel never leaves the tiny island; also, he hardly ever talks to Roxana. She, meanwhile, reveres him: He is a genius, and it is a privilege to serve him. "Almost every day," she tells the travelers, "there is a spiritual presence.... They come and hold long conversations in the winter, when there is nothing else to do; that, I think, is very kind of them."

The narrator looks at her. What he sees is a plain, dumpy woman whose "gown was limp" and "hands roughened with work." Also, she has no collar around her throat. "O magic rim of white," our romantic urbanite intones to himself, "great is thy power! With thee, man is civilized; without thee, he becomes at once a savage."

But Roxana feeds the two young men magnificently and they went to sleep in deliciously clean beds with well-filled pillows that make our narrator wax eloquent once again: "O pillow! Has any one sung thy

praises? When tired or sick, when discouraged or sad, what gives so much comfort as a...good generous soft pillow, deftly cased in smooth, cool, untrimmed linen!"

So the two settle in, and Woolson interweaves the self-mocking rhetoric that is their style—there's a long, hilarious exchange between them about literary Somebodies as opposed to literary Nobodies—with ever more wondrous observations about their loony hosts until, at last, the texture of Samuel and Roxana's lives—something strange and marvelous in itself—becomes one with the ever-changing glory of nature itself. Which means the gloom as well as the joy must have its moment. An hour comes when the narrator sees Roxana sitting motionless in her boat, and the deforming solitariness that marks her existence is borne in on him. Suddenly "the Flats looked wild and desolate," and "God help her!" bursts involuntarily from him.

Fifteen years pass before the narrator

returns to the "grassy sea," and when he does, much has changed. A canal has been cut through the enchanted land and with it has come development; development has resulted in fewer birds and fish that have "grown shy." The house on the island is still there, but Roxana and Waiting Samuel are obviously long gone. Were they dead, he wonders, or had "a new vision sent them farther toward the setting sun?" He will never know. "But the water lilies were beautiful as of old, and the grasses as delicate and luxuriant." He bids the magical place goodbye with the promise that while "no artist has painted, no poet has sung your wild, vanishing charm," in his heart it would live forever.

After a year or two in Europe, Constance Fenimore Woolson should have gone home to the idiom and the landscape that had never failed to inspire her. She was one American writer for whom going abroad had done infinitely more harm than good. ■



Tina Fey in *Whiskey Tango Foxtrot*.

Neverlands

by STUART KLAWANS

Disgusted with her dead-end job and fed up with a diffident boyfriend, that overflowing barrel of misbehavior Melissa McCarthy undertakes a radical makeover, shipping out as a war correspondent for Fox News—no experi-

ence necessary!—in the fish-out-of-water comedy *What the Fox?*! Hilarity ensues, as the lovable Melissa shoulders another network's cookie-cutter blonde into a ditch, liberates all the women in a Kabul marketplace by tripping over their burkas, panics

our troops while also saving them with the woozily aimed blast of a rocket launcher, and at last finds her soul mate (after an alcohol-induced blackout) snoring right in her own bed, in the inert form of freelance photographer Seth Rogen.

I might not respect *What the Fox?!* or own up to having laughed at it, but I would pay to see this film, if someone were to make it. In the case of the actually existing *Whiskey Tango Foxtrot*, I'd be more cautious with my money. Though similar in premise to the imaginary movie, the real *WTF* is less an entertainment than a medicinal product, marketed by Tina Fey with good intentions, considerable valor, and maybe just a little too much self-regard. Her dark eyes set in a level gaze, her frame held taut, Fey looks intent throughout much of the film, as if straining to make the sale: for the character she's playing, for the women of Afghanistan and all the world, but most of all for herself.

One of the few women in show business with the power to develop her own projects—and God bless her for it—Fey is both the star of *Whiskey Tango Foxtrot* and a producer, whose frequent television collaborator Robert Carlock tailored the screenplay to her, based on the memoir *The Taliban Shuffle* by former *Chicago Tribune* reporter Kim Barker. All credit to Fey for betting on the property. As a high-level TV executive remarks in *Whiskey Tango Foxtrot*, Americans don't want to watch the war in Afghanistan—especially if the actress who brings it to them provides only one part comic bumbling to nine parts feminist self-actualization.

But then, Fey has a hedge against her gamble. Barker portrays the war-correspondent lifestyle as a perpetual frat party; and so *Whiskey Tango Foxtrot* can begin in audience-appealing mid-rave, with a neon-hued montage of bongos, bottles, and pogoing bodies swathed in a dense atmosphere of horniness. Despite such high jinks, though, the rough laughter of *The Taliban Shuffle* has mostly fallen silent in a movie that delivers raucousness but little mirth. As for Barker's contextualizing comments about US policy and methods in Afghanistan, they've all but evaporated.

There is a telling exception, which I'll get to. For the most part, though, *Whiskey Tango Foxtrot* treats the war as if it were a geographic feature of Afghanistan, where nature has set forth mountains, deserts, and chaotic bloodshed. The conflict, evidently without beginning or end, also seems to lack any meaning—except that it might bring a small measure of freedom to Afghan women (those who want it) and a combination of adventure, sisterly support (more apparent than real), and career advancement to one particular woman from America.

If that woman reads as both “Kim Barker” and Tina Fey, it's because *Whiskey Tango*

Foxtrot is so clearly designed to show what Fey can do beyond comedy. She previously tried playing for something other than laughs in the not-great, not-bad *Admission* (2013), and now she risks straight drama for much longer stretches—very creditably, too. On the upside, she's found an excellent outlet for the qualities that distinguish her comic performances: sharp intelligence and a less-than-optimistic assessment of human nature. Fey is persuasive in scenes that call for Barker to exercise self-control before dangerous idiots and rings entirely true whenever that control lapses, which it does in gradations ranging from impatience and aggravation to righteous indignation and towering rage.

On the downside, the directors of *Whiskey Tango Foxtrot*, Glenn Ficarra and John Requa, have no gradations of their own. They can do well in comedy, as they showed with *Crazy, Stupid, Love* (2011). But when called on to blend Fey's on-edge performance into a story full of unruliness, happy vulgarity, and violence, their solution is to flatten everything. *Whiskey Tango Foxtrot* is a movie with neither highs nor lows. There is not a single moment about which you'd say to a friend, “You've got to see this.” The only well-developed motif (this says everything) is a morning ritual of tooth brushing.

Other directors might have done a little better with the material; but I suspect the dullness here is the price of having treated the war as business-as-usual, whether for an American TV reporter who seeks to move up in her profession—standard operating procedure—or for the civilians and combatants who get blown to pieces because, hey, that's Afghanistan.

Here we come to the exception to the movie's lack of context—an attempted exception, I should say. Toward the end, on a visit to a Marine who's been grievously wounded, Fey receives from him the closest thing that *Whiskey Tango Foxtrot* offers in the way of a history. It's not much: just a list of interventions by major powers, starting with the United States and going back through the Russians to the British. What can a Marine, or by extension an Afghan, do when caught up in this eternal mayhem? “You embrace the suck,” the man says with forceful good cheer. “You move the fuck forward. What other choice do we have?”

We could have had Melissa McCarthy, that's what. Compared to the nostrum that *Whiskey Tango Foxtrot* peddles at the end—a mixture of resignation and careerism, packaged as wisdom—McCarthy's loud, rude disobedience is probably a mature choice.

There are half a dozen moments you've really got to see in the Coen brothers' *Hail, Caesar!*—more than enough to make this movie worth your while. And on top of them, you get a cartographic puzzle.

It's a problem of mapping the film's version of 1950s Hollywood onto historical fact. The movie's Neverland overlaps with the known world tantalizingly enough that you wonder if the coincidence might mean something, but diverges so frequently that you're tempted to think the Coens, once more, are just teasing. I might use the latter possibility as an excuse to enjoy what I can and give up thinking about the rest—but if I did that, I couldn't make sense of the *Comnies*.

They abound in *Hail, Caesar!* To start figuring out why, I note the one historic event that's mentioned in the film: the tests of thermonuclear bombs on the Bikini Atoll. That datum gives me a coordinate on which the Coens' Hollywood and reality would presumably align. It must be 1954 when the story's central character, producer Eddie Mannix (Josh Brolin), steers a fleet of movies through the shoals of disaster at the fictitious Capitol Pictures.

Eddie seems reasonably impressed when an acquaintance—not a Communist, but a big-talking Lockheed Martin executive—passes him the information about the Bikini Atoll over lunch in a Chinese restaurant; but the news is of only tangential interest, given Eddie's preoccupation with potential bombs of his own. He's worried about a biblical epic featuring the studio's most breastplate-ready actor, of granite chin and brain (George Clooney); an aquatic musical whose mermaid-tailed star (Scarlett Johansson) talks like a long-haul trucker and conducts her sex life to match; and a sailors-on-leave picture headlined by America's buffest tap dancer (Channing Tatum), draped in tight bell-bottoms and a series of exuberantly male dance partners. These films within the film—each a beautifully realized imaginary version of an actual Hollywood fantasy—match the presumed time frame pretty well. *The Robe* (1953) and *Million Dollar Mermaid* (1952) were indeed products of the hydrogen-blast era; and although Gene Kelly had strutted through his best sailor days several years earlier, he was still grinning at the top in 1954.

On the other hand, 1954 would have been a little late for Capitol Pictures to crank out oaters with a handsome young singing cowboy (Alden Ehrenreich), or “Good Neighbor policy” musicals with a

cheerfully wriggling South American fruit bowl (Veronica Osorio). As for Capitol's latest drawing-room drama, translated from stage to screen by the preeminent director Laurence Lorentz (Ralph Fiennes), pictures like that had died of natural causes on an RKO soundstage before the United States ever entered World War II.

These other films within the film set up a more elastic relationship between the maps of Neverland and reality. Then you get to the Commies, and, with a snap, the elastic smacks you in the face.

Since it's impossible to spoil the delirium of *Hail, Caesar!*, I will reveal that in the film's 1954, Communist screenwriters, none of them apparently out of work, hang around Malibu with a solemnly pedantic Professor Marcuse, who has been tutoring them in scientific Marxism. Whether the Coen brothers know that the real Herbert Marcuse was a charmingly waggish critic of all determinisms, economic included, I can't say; but they're certainly aware that by 1954, screenwriters who were members of the party, or even said to have been associated with it, were unemployable, and as likely to be found in Mexico City and London as Los Angeles.

The tangle grows more complex. It's clear that *Hail, Caesar!* must be understood as a speculative fiction, which imagines a world where the blacklist never happened. At the same time, though, and in the same gesture, *Hail, Caesar!* operates as a sophisticated cultural history. Adopting an argument that Thom Andersen and Noel Burch set out in their 1996 documentary *Red Hollywood*, the Coens assume that Communists really did work their messages into all manner of studio productions, including pictures like *The Robe*—the screenplay for which was written, in part, by the Hollywood 10's Albert Maltz.

I can think of two ways to solve this puzzle (two probably being the minimum required). First, maybe the Coens know perfectly well that the real Marcuse thought that artworks in late-capitalist society—movies, for example—could open potentially revolutionary thoughts and feelings but also shut them down. Given this back-and-forth dynamic, it makes sense to imagine Communists as both blacklisted and not blacklisted, defeated and triumphant. Or maybe, as an alternative solution, we can step back from the revue-like parade of wonderfully executed parodies in *Hail, Caesar!* and think about the frame story as a genre film in itself: a noir, obviously, starring Brolin as the tough-guy moralist.

If you look at *Hail, Caesar!* that way, then of course Eddie Mannix has to contend with a Communist cell. That's what the real Hollywood was making its noir heroes do, circa 1954.

Double vision? Triple vision? I've lost count of the implied perspectives in *Hail, Caesar!* All I know is that at the end, Mannix tries to click them into register, making his own little speech about accepting things as they are and getting on with your job. I can accept that advice when it comes from him: Eddie's job is to manufacture amazing improbabilities. Whether revolutionary or not, they're a world of fun.

At once a family drama, landscape film, neorealist exposé, and ethnographic immersion, the remarkable debut feature *Songs My Brothers Taught Me* is a product of the four years that writer-director Chloé Zhao spent on the Pine Ridge reservation in South Dakota, getting to know some of its Lakota residents and gathering impressions of the texture of their lives. In outline, the film is simple: It's the story of a sensitive, fatherless, bootlegging high-school student (John Reddy) who wants to leave the reservation with his college-bound girlfriend (Taysha Fuller) but is blocked, partly by adverse circumstances and partly by his reluctance to abandon his little sister (Jashaun St. John). In form and emotional tone, though, the film is exceptionally rich—by turns raw, dreamy, harsh, sensuous, touching, intimate, garrulous, and elliptical. An award winner at the American Indian and Red Nation film festivals, *Songs My Brothers Taught Me* has now had its theatrical premiere at Film Forum in New York.

Also new to theaters, and diametrically opposite, is Benjamin Dickinson's *Creative Control*: a just slightly futuristic satire that takes place in a Brooklyn where the people are all professional hipsters, the apartments are all spanking new glass boxes with river views, and the relationships are all mediated—mostly on Lucite-slab smartphones that you hardly even see, but now, most excitingly, on eyeglasses that enable you to picture whatever you want and believe it's real. Filmed in an immaculately chilly black-and-white that suits the theme, but scored with baroque and classical masterworks that nicely undercut the story's techno supremacy, *Creative Control* is maybe a little too hip itself, too neat in design and gleaming on the surface. I stayed with it anyway. It's a morality tale that Kubrick might have conceived as a lark.

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"The law is meant to be my servant and not my master, still less my torturer and my murderer."

—James Baldwin

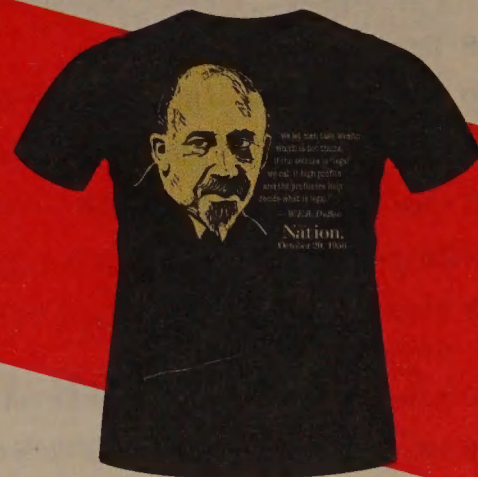
The Nation, July 11, 1966



"We let men take wealth which is not theirs; if the seizure is 'legal' we call it high profits and the profiteers help decide what is legal."

—W.E.B. Du Bois

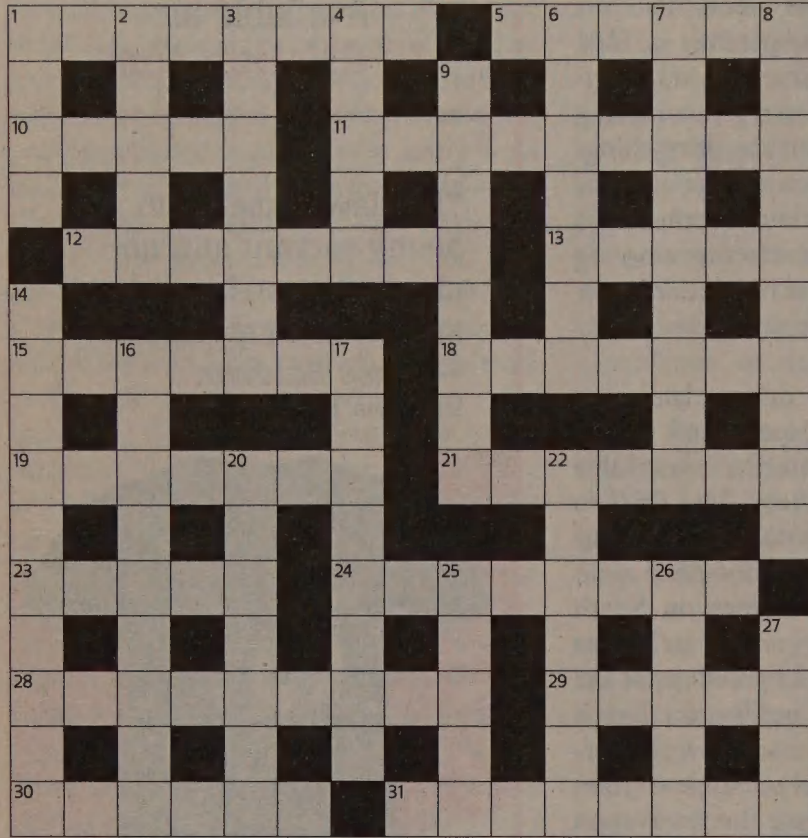
The Nation, October 20, 1956



UPGNation.com

Puzzle No. 3393

JOSHUA KOSMAN AND HENRI PICCIOTTO



ACROSS

- 1 We're crazy about Virgin Islands magazine (6)
- 10 A parrot states: "In the Northeast and the West, work!" (5)
- 11 Consequent note: Muslim ruler meets leader of Tajikistan (9)
- 12 Create mess following a blockbuster movie and others like it (2,6)
- 13 Clean inside of cages, courageously (5)
- 15 Zeus' wife sports highest rating in Middle Eastern city (7)
- 18 Terrible seaside illness (7)
- 19 Proceed clumsily with young lady near university unit (7)
- 21 Don McLean's left one ring in dilapidated sofa (7)
- 23 One hundred four changes in Greek island (5)
- 24 Uncommunicative cat? (8)
- 28 Distressed nun wearing ragged mantle for the negation of a sacrament (9)
- 29 In return, a couple sampling from Gruyère cheese (5)
- 30 Glutton limiting a German's work in the garden (6)

- 31 Supernatural being goes back around front of house with Lassie, for example (8)

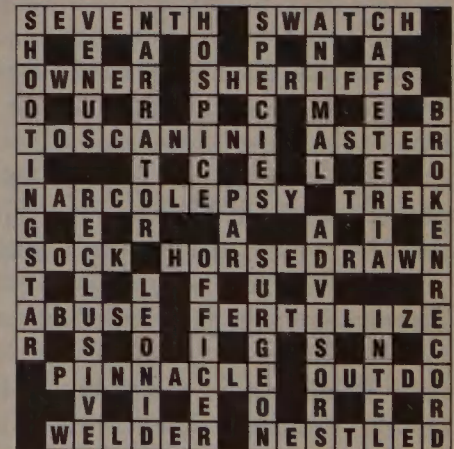
DOWN

- 1 Unconscious state for a lesbian parent, perhaps? (4)
- 2 Even pieces in ruins count as complete (5)
- 3 For instance, first equipment for a vocalizing cow? (3,4)
- 4 Officer in the grass, heading backward (5)
- 5 Type of secret agents covering European Community (7)
- 6 Joins with less tin, possibly (7)
- 7 Boyfriend is essential to sustain a moratorium (9)
- 8 "Musk" comes after, with a name for large fruit (10)
- 9 The first man to eat a bird that's found on the Nile (5,3)
- 14 Acting teacher's vehicle in a western (10)
- 16 Broadway director and Shakespearean slacker swapping parts (3,6)
- 17 Rare athletic feat, with the intro botched (2-6)
- 20 Sentimental Democrat breaks up endless beating (7)
- 22 One half of partygoers supporting heavy tire (7)
- 25 charlie@church.net (5)
- 26 Shot, or many shots? (5)
- 27 Blast prohibition on guns, originally (4)

SOLUTION TO PUZZLE NO. 3392

ACROSS 1 S(EVENT)H 5 S + WATCH
8 O(W)NER (*Reno rev.*) 9 SHE RIFFS
11 TO SCAN IN + I 12 anag.
13 NAR(COLE + PS)Y (*yarn anag.*)
16 TRE + K 18 2 defs. 19 pun 23 anag.
24 FER (rev.) + TI(LIZ)E 26 PIN(NACL)E
27 O + UT + DO 28 W + ELDER
20 NE(STL)ED

DOWN 1 2 defs. 3 anag. 4 HO[t] SPICE
5 SP(EC)IES 6 rev. 7 CA(FETE)R + IA
10 pun 14 triple anag. 15 & 2 PAR + VENUS 17 AD VISORS 20 OFF(IC)ER 21 S(URGE)ON 22 LEON + ID 25 hidden



Kosman & Picciotto explain what they're up to at thenation.com/article/solving-nations-cryptic-crosswords/.

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If you're over 65, ask yourself...

Will today be the day I'll fall?

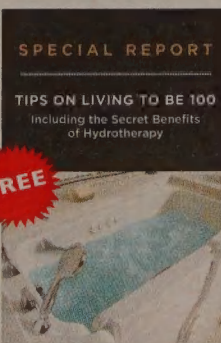
It's a Fact. One in 3 Americans over the age of 65 will fall this year. The majority of these falls will occur in the bathroom. For older people, with limited mobility and less-than-ideal balance, trying to take a big step over the side of a traditional bathtub is a recipe for disaster. Falls are responsible for sending thousands of seniors to the hospital, an assisted living facility... or worse. Think you won't be among those who fall? Think again.



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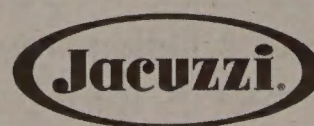
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- *The New York Times*, January 26, 2013

If the industry is to survive, gun enthusiasts must embrace all youth shooting activities, including ones, "using semiautomatic firearms with magazines holding 30-100 rounds."
- *Andy Fink, Editor of Junior Shooters magazine*

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